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An Action Research Study: Inclusive Culture Formation in a New High School

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AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY: INCLUSIVE CULTURE FORMATION IN A NEW HIGH SCHOOL

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Dedication

Dedicated to all those who helped me on this effort.

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Abstract

The culture of a school community is critical to every aspect of its existence, including academic expectations, degree of inclusiveness, safety, and overall well-being of students and staff. While culture can be an abstract, elusive concept, it makes itself known upon entering the school. School culture can exist on multiple levels, exerting a cohesive impact on relationships and interactions and opportunities. Adding to its complexity, a school culture can be perceived differently by individuals, depending on their unique experiences. Further, a school culture is inevitable and difficult to change; a culture *will* form and once formed, is resistant to even the best intentions to alter it. These factors make attention to an emerging culture of importance to new schools. The purpose of this action research was to examine the impact of the explicit focus on culture through the creation of a Community of Practice (CoP). Additionally, a CoP can support collaboration between department members. Interview results and activities originating from CoP planning reveal that teachers are concerned with student inclusion and want to contribute to a welcoming, accepting school. It is important for school leaders to facilitate and support these opportunities. Further, action research can help create a focused renewal of culture. Major elements of a developing school culture to emerge from this study were multiple opportunities for informal communication, encouragement of individual as well collective investment in inclusive activities, creation of and encouragement of a creative, entrepreneurial impact on the school and its activities. Recommendations are that schools wanting to contribute to a positive, inclusive culture would do well to make purposeful, explicit efforts toward this endeavor.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

"*The only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture*"

(Schein, 1985, p. 11)

Background

In this action research study, the formation of school culture was explored in the context of a newly opened school comprised of a diverse population of students, including students with significant disabilities previously served in a day school setting. A new school can serve as a hub of an entire community, a symbol of new beginnings with its corollaries of optimism and expectations. The development of positive culture in a new school can be an opportunity for an inclusive, diverse environment to emerge. Conversely, a negative and destructive culture can develop, insidiously and inexorably impacting the school and potentially entire communities. One thinks of racial tensions that have been allowed to fester or socio-economic divisions that have resulted in disparities, or even the appearance of disparities, to envision the potentially destructive power of culture. Academic achievement and graduation gaps, the disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline practices, and lack of opportunities for special education students are just examples of educational problems whose persistent and pernicious natures place them squarely within a cultural purview (Simone, 2012). This study examined the actions and perceptions of a community of practitioners engaged in activities designed to

encourage inclusive learning environments for all students as part of the developing overall school culture.

The power of culture can supersede academic and athletic success, excellent teaching, and parental involvement. Based on findings from new school openings, "getting the culture right is the single most important factor in the long-term success of a school" (Vander Ark, 2016, para. 2). Culture can transcend gleaming new school buildings built to provide a state-of-the art educational experience. Even these multi-million-dollar buildings, with the most modern amenities, will ultimately be defined by the human dynamic that happens within its walls, vulnerable to the inevitable dominance of the culture that emerges. Culture, then, is not an ancillary component of a school, but rather a critical aspect that has significant implications on the entire community. Bolman and Deal (2003) sum up the intangible quality of culture, writing, "organizations function like complex, constantly changing, organic pinball machines" (p. 245).

In the realm of education, deficit thinking is a manifestation of the view that the alleged deficiencies of a population of students is the reason for poor performance. Deficit thinking, often referred to as blaming the victim, has a long history and contributes to economic and social inequities (Simone, 2012). Deficit thinking, as an element of a school culture, is one of the contributing factors to failure to reach marginalized students. Avoiding deficit thinking and creating an inclusive, welcoming culture is a critical responsibility of school leaders. "These leaders see themselves as stewardesses and coaches in the development of a school culture of inclusiveness" (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003, p. 7). It can be said that these principals advocate, lead, and keep at the center of their practice and vision issues of race, class, gender,

disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States. A restorative leader, then, is focused on addressing and eliminating marginalization by ensuring a school culture that reflects inclusive schooling practices for students with disabilities, English language learners, and other students traditionally segregated in schools. This action research study is "grounded in the belief that social justice cannot be a reality in schools where students with disabilities are segregated" (Theoharis, 2007, p. 222).

The abstract nature of culture may contribute to a failure to understand or properly estimate its importance. Some critics have responded to the new but sometimes unclear focus on culture by labeling it a "weasel word" (Wasserman & Hausrath, 2006, p. 41). However, failure to consider the proper importance of culture can have dire consequences. Schein (1985) asserts that "culture determines and limits strategy" (p. 33). Similarly, Haberman (2013, para. 8) warned against "mandates without meaning"—initiatives, projects and programs rolled out with the best research and/or intentions, but without consideration of cultural context. Barth (2002) wrote,

> All school cultures are incredibly resistant to change, which makes school improvement—from within or from without usually futile. Unless teachers and administrators act to change the culture of the school, all innovations, high standards, and high-stakes tests should fit in and around existing elements of the school culture. They will remain superficial window dressing, incapable of making much of a difference. (p. 2)

Simply put, Barth (2002) emphasizes,

> A school's culture has far more influence on the life and learning in the schoolhouse than the president of the country, the state department of education, the Superintendent, the school board, or even the principal, teachers, and parents can ever have. (p. 6)

At a time when schools strive to not only fulfill their mission of preparing students for a rapidly changing world but attempt to address issues of equity and achievement gaps, the ramifications of ignoring this reality is costly in terms of budgets but even more so in terms of the support and trust of schools and communities. School culture is directly associated with every aspect of a school community, including student achievement (Kythreotis, Pashiardis, & Kyriakides, 2010; MacNeil, Prater, & Busch, 2010). There may be various reasons for this relationship. One intriguing suggestion for culture's influence on achievement might be a gravitation that creates a social cohesion. Deal and Kennedy (1983) propose that this coalescence or binding of factors includes specific goals and behavior. Schein (1985) built on this theory by proposing an element of continuity, that as new members join the given community, they are exposed and integrated to the norms of the given culture.

Given the assertion that culture is "the way in which the group thinks of itself in its relationships with the objects that affect it" (Lincoln & Guillot, 2004, p. 7), these expectations are critically important. Within school culture the primary "objects that affect it" are the students and families within their communities. This association includes successful implementation of change and reform initiatives (Gehlbach et al., 2015). Schools with positive cultures are correlated with improved student motivation (Deal & Peterson, 2003). Additionally, when similarity is leveraged in the classroom,

student achievement is improved, and absences and tardies are reduced, particularly with minority students (Gehlbach et al., 2015). Most importantly, as schools attempt to successfully reach all students and close achievement gaps, it is critical to keep in mind "It is through the school culture that we have the greatest chance of improving what our students learn" (Cunningham & Gresso, 1995, p. 19). However, building and influencing a positive school culture is a complex endeavor. At its core, a collective culture is, paradoxically, dependent on investing in the individuals that create that culture. School culture, then, cannot be "truly addressed in any significant way until the context and the experiences of people are well understood" (Beaudoin & Taylor, 2004, p. 3).

Statement of Action Research Problem

A newly opened school offers an exciting opportunity for stakeholders to first imagine and then form a community that espouses shared values and beliefs. Expectations are raised, and students, teachers, and families are offered a new beginning. Optimism can rise, particularly with impressive school buildings, new programs, and academic offerings. Holmes (2009) has claimed that,

> Schools are natural hubs of a neighborhood or community and can serve as the foundation for community partnerships that are beneficial to students, families, businesses, agencies, and other civic organizations. By building communication, sharing resources, and developing unique solutions to community problems, these partnerships can become vital and organic entities that are agents of change in the community. (p. 1)

However, opening a new school offers significant challenges as competing values and beliefs vie for dominance, creating conflict that may interfere with the work necessary to

developing a shared vision and formation of a school culture that mirrors this vision. Leadership in new schools devote a great deal of time addressing housekeeping issues, bringing together differing ways of doing things to craft new expectations (Holmes, 2009). Even though principals are aware of the importance of the cultural development of their schools, they are simply unable to alone invest the time or energy to its development. This can potentially compromise the development of the relationships necessary for building a strong culture.

Evidence supporting the existence of the problem. Shark Lane High School, the context for this study, is the newly opened high school in a large and growing school district. Designated as a performing arts center, Shark Lane provides relief to overcrowding conditions at other high schools and, in addition to those students slated to attend based on school boundaries, the school accepts students from other high schools by application. The school has been publicly controversial due in part to building costs and the perception that it has created resource inequities across the District.

The opening of a new school carries tremendous promise and potential. The student demographic of Shark Lane High School is diverse, and its faculty and staff have come together from various other school settings within the district and from outside the district. Given its positioning as a school of choice for students interested in the performing arts program and the new home to students with disabilities formerly attending a day school, the population at Shark Lane reflects a true continuum of abilities, needs and services.

One of the key aspects of Shark Lane School's developing culture has been its inclusion of a significant population of special education students and families into the

comprehensive school setting. Students enrolled in Grades 10, 11, and 12 at Winding Road, a separate public day school for students with intellectual disabilities and autism, were merged into Shark Lane High School, a new school opening in a relatively affluent community. Winding Road had served its special education community for over 30 years before closing its doors and had developed its own unique school culture. By their placement at a separate public day school, these students have experienced little success in large, heterogeneous learning environments. As might be expected, this type of transition can instill fear and trepidation as students and their families move away from the familiar and face the unknown in a new learning environment. The development of an inclusive school culture is a critical element in the successful transition for these students and their families. Additionally, as a new staff comes together within a new school context, they, too, require opportunities to build relationships, develop a shared vision and common practices. Each member of this new school community brought with them a set of values and beliefs, creating an environment ripe for the clashing of cultures and conflict.

An inclusive school culture is reflective of the meshed values, actions and beliefs of the stakeholders. At Shark Lane High School, the development of a sustainable inclusive culture will rely on the collective effort of the special education department and the way issues of inclusion, co-teaching, and participation are envisioned. For example, the practice of co-teaching, in which a special education teacher and a general education teacher team to teach a class, can be a complex partnership. At times, the special education teacher is treated as a junior partner. However, many of these short-comings can originate in a special education department's failure to articulate its own

department's goals and mission. Accordingly, these departments cannot then represent or advocate for their students to the greater school community.

The culture of an organization is reflective of the values, beliefs, and interactions of its stakeholders. Fullan (2007 suggested that a "single factor common to success is that relationships improve. If relationships improve, schools get better" (p. 20). Effective school cultures are made up of collaborative teams of stakeholders who engage in actions aligned with a shared moral purpose and intensive focus on student learning targets. Relationship building, of course, takes time. If we opt for Bolman and Deal's (2003) minimalist definition of culture as "the way we do things around here" (p. 6), the challenge is clear to a newly opened school: not only has there has been no "here" to "do things," there has not been a "we." Yet, a school culture will inevitably emerge. "If the school community does not act upon the culture consciously or subconsciously, they are left at the mercy of ignorance" (Das, 2006, p. 194).

Further, new schools will be staffed by individuals from different schools, and their previous cultures will influence their behaviors and expectations. Creating a common culture from these disparate cultures can be difficult and time consuming (Cannon, 2011). Specifically challenging to the formation of culture in this context is the uniqueness of the population of students with significant disabilities and the successful transition to the comprehensive high school setting.

Some organization compartmentalization is inevitable. The faculty and staff who work closely students with disabilities have the potential to shape an inclusive learning environment through their purposeful interactions within their department and across the school community. Das (2006) describes the separation that can exist within a group of

people or organization. Special educators have roles and responsibilities related to the student population they serve that by nature sets them apart from other faculty. Segmentation is not necessarily a pejorative description or obstacle to collaboration. However, in some cases this separation *can* have negative consequences if there is not an ability to connect to other groups. This is particularly true of special education departments that will naturally have professional ties but must form meaningful collaboration with regular education teachers to create both effective team-teaching partnerships as well as increased opportunities for their students to access classes, activities and programs in the greater school community. Confounding the complexity of a new school's culture is that once it is established, it can be resistant to change. Even under the best of circumstances, it will be "difficult to achieve and may take several years to accomplish" (Waldron & McClesky, 2007, p. 60). Collaboration and effective partnerships are left to chance without an intentional effort to engage practitioners in the process.

Culture and marginalized students. School culture is important to marginalized populations. If school culture and student success, for example, focuses solely on academic achievement, then they fail to "recognize that the academic child is not easily separated from the social, emotional, and economic turmoil that often undermines his/her real opportunities to learn" (Larson, 2010, p. 327). A culture marked by this narrow thinking can lead to equity traps (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004) that not only limit academic expectations but impact relationships, discipline, and participation. One of these traps is deficit thinking; the focus on school culture requires a paradigm shift in which it is placed in importance alongside standardized testing. Additionally, it

necessitates “the ability to recognize the culture within a school building, how that culture is created, and finally how it is implemented, is fundamental in understanding how students with special education needs are integrated within the general education atmosphere” (Hudgins, 2012, p. 10). Having a vision of a school culture is a preliminary step; these steps must invariably mean creating a shared vision of that culture.

Context of the Action Research Problem

In its second year, Shark Lane High School serves a student population of 1540 (see Table 1 and 2). The Shark Lane school community represents a blending of three high schools, including those students from around the district accepted by application to participate in the Fine Arts specialty program. In addition, the faculty and staff are made up of those who have either applied for positions at the school or may have been reassigned to the school based on reduction in staffing at the other high schools, as in the case of teachers serving students at the Windy Road School.

Table 1

Shark Lane Student Demographics Year One Race/Ethnicity

Race/Ethnicity	% Students
Hispanic of any race	19.6%
Am. Indian/ Alaskan	0.5%
Asian	6.9%
Black/ African-Am.	18.7%
Hawaiian/ Pacific Isl.	0.3%
White	47.5%
Two or More	6.5%

Note. Data adopted from Colganhs.edu. Retrieved from https://www.pwcs.edu

Table 2

Shark Lane Student Demographics Year One Students in Special Programs

Program	Number	%
Gifted	366	24.0%
Career and Tech	724	47.6%
ESOL	101	6.6%
Special Education	154	10.1%
Econ. Disadvantaged	318	20.8%

Note. Data adopted from Colganhs.edu. Retrieved from https://www.pwcs.edu. All values indicate student enrollment in special programs as of 6/30/2017.

The state of special education at the opening of the new school, then, was a hodgepodge of committed teachers, perhaps a department that treats co-teaching with the collegial respect it deserves, and maybe a coach or administrator that attempts to create non-traditional opportunities for special education students. This haphazard approach, however, is inconsistent with an inclusive, equitable school, or the spirit of social justice. The purposeful participation of special education practitioners in the development of a school culture serves the modern social justice movement, including inclusion, increasing opportunities and disproportionate identification of minority students. During the first year, teachers in the special education department voluntarily participated in the first cycle of action research in the development of a Community of Practice, designed as a collaborative venue for professional conversation, sharing experiences and culture development. This study will culminate in the second action research cycle, however, the

artifacts collected, and activities conducted during the first cycle will be included in this study as extant data.

Theoretical Framework

Communities of Practice align with a constructivist approach and are constructivist in nature. Constructivism advocates knowledge and relationships are constructed by individuals (Lynch, 2016). Specifically, CoPs are influenced by the beliefs of social constructivism, which holds that "social worlds develop out of individuals' interactions with their culture and society" (Lynch, 2016, p. 22). Similarly, Communities of Practice operate with the belief that knowledge sharing and cultural development are "social as well as individual" (Wenger, McDermontt, & Snyder, 2002, p. 10).

One of the goals of CoPs is to facilitate how individuals enter, become members, and participate in each community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This process is critical to culture formation and is reliant on social interaction. At the heart of this action research is a commitment to the belief that culture, knowledge-sharing and relationships should not be left to chance or formal processes of meetings or professional development. Rather, an organization should engage in cycles of purposeful, explicit attention and promotion of human interaction. Additionally, an inclusive school culture does not follow from good intentions or mission statements. Rather, inclusion necessitates "at its core, a planned organizational reform that requires substantial commitment on the part of school leaders" (Mayrowetz &Weinstein, 1999, p. 424). Obviously, this also requires a commitment from the greater school community. However, while schools are certainly more progressive toward special education, "education for students with special needs is often conceptualized as a primarily a concern for special educators and parents" (Kavale &

Forness, 2000, p. 285). Given this reality the development of a special education department's culture is imperative.

Finally, the constructivism framework of both action research and CoPs are compatible with a social learning systems paradigm, with "emergent structure, complex relationships, self-organization, dynamic boundaries, ongoing negotiation of identity and cultural meaning" (Wenger, 1998, p. 27). Culture will invariably be created by the life experiences, viewpoints and perceived treatment of the individuals involved. Culture, like knowledge, is created or constructed by participants and their interactions. Additionally, constructivism stresses the meaning of knowledge and interactions. Ultimately, a developing culture is created by the quality, value, and meaning of interactions.

Action Research Questions

In formulating research questions, consideration was given to the complexities of culture in a newly opened school. This development is not a linear process. It was important that the questions be developed to allow for a certain level of uncertainty. Additionally, questions needed to incorporate how departmental culture translate to school-wide practices and culture.

1. How does a Community of Practice contribute to the development of culture within a special education department in a newly opened high school?
2. To what extent are members of the special education department concerned about the inclusion of special education students in the larger school community?
3. What actions might the CoP engage in the next round of action research to foster more inclusive opportunities for special education students?

Action Research Model

Originating with Kurt Lewin in the mid-twentieth century, action research was a response to the need for comparative research within an organization as well as reconciling findings and action (Craig, 2009). Within an action research model, the practitioner is actively involved in the research process, a participant observer as well as a "researcher-as-instrument" (Craig, 2009). This model is an appropriate choice when practitioners work collaboratively to conduct a study within their own context. Action research is a spiraling of processes, cycling between reflection, findings, and actions, relying on multiple forms of data to develop an action plan (Craig, 2009). Perhaps the most direct definition of action research is "a disciplined process of inquiry conducted *by* and *for* those taking the action" (Sagor, 2000, para. 1). Action research means that those most immediately involved in each situation are directly involved in the research process.

Making action research particularly relevant for the study of culture is that it stresses that for "change to be effective, it must take place at the group level, and must be a participative and collaborative process which involves all of those concerned" (Barnes, 2015, p. 5). The development of a school culture is a complex, amorphous process. If this culture takes place within a newly opened school, the complexity is increased. While hiring the "best and brightest" is the stated intention of many new schools, this can also lead to conflict. Teachers may bring with them values and beliefs from their experiences in other contexts and must find ways to compromise, to co-exist and in many cases, amalgamate into a new culture. Further, while culture's nature must be respected regarding its unpredictable and organic development, it is nevertheless important to address culture in a timely fashion.

Once a culture begins to form and the corresponding "sacred norms" become ensconced, change can become difficult (Corbet, Firestone, & Rossman, 1987). Therefore, the philosophical approach to developing culture must align to its unique nature in several aspects. Action Research meets several criteria, making it ideal to the study of school culture. First, to be a part of a school culture study is to become inherently part of the culture. Similarly, action research starts from a participatory paradigm (Heron & Reason, 1997). In short, this participation means that "to experience anything is to participate in it, and to participate in it is both to mold and to encounter it" (Heron & Reason, 1997, p. 3). Second, Noffke (1997) has suggested that action research is focused across three dimensions: the professional, the personal, and the political. These three elements are critical pillars around which school cultures develop. Finally, action research "involves a cyclical and iterative process involving trust-building, partnership development and maintenance in all phases of the research" (Morales, 2016, p. 148). This cyclical process mirrors the complexity of the study of culture—how the "more patient, less deliberate modes" that are "particularly suited to making sense of situations that are intricate, shadowy or ill defined" and that "incomprehension is to respect the complexities of situations that do not have easy answers" (Fullan, 2007, p. 123). While action research is used in various fields, relevant is its use as an "emancipatory practice" aimed at "working with oppressed groups" on "generative themes" that impact the groups" (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 9). This makes action research a potentially powerful tool to work with when studying the special education community.

Community of Practice

While several actions will support the goals of this study, the most important was the creation of the Community of Practice. Lave and Wanger (1998) emphasize that CoP members may have different levels of participation and commitment to the community. One of the strengths of this form of membership is that these levels and participations may fluctuate due to numerous reasons. This creates a form of democratic leadership, in that "learning is in the relationships between people" (Smith, 2009, para. 3). This type of leadership and participation was fittingly the focus of Lewin's first action research projects.

Fullan (2007) proposes that a key component of organizational development and change is connecting peers in ways that have purpose and alignment with the vision. To this end, members of the special education department at Shark Lane High School have been engaged in a CoP for crafting a vision for special education in the school and to examine the influence they may have on a developing school culture. The development of a CoP is marked by several characteristics of participatory research, including understanding social processes and structures, the researcher and community together "produce critical knowledge aimed at social transformation and results are immediately applicable" (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 16). The framework is strongly influenced by the belief that culture can be influenced. Finally, a CoP honors the importance of relationships.

While this study will conclude at the end of a second action research cycle, extant data collected as part of the first cycle will be used in the analysis. During the first cycle and as part of the formation of the CoP, all members of the special education department

completed a culture survey. This survey documents specific elements the participants identify as critical to creating a positive department culture. While department meetings are required as part of a school-wide expectation, participation in the CoP is voluntary, focusing on department culture and its progress. Although driven by the purpose of identifying aspects of school culture that influence students with disabilities, the agenda provides for spontaneity and actions will be based organically on problems, conflicts, solutions, and success as they arise.

Definition of Terms

Community of Practice-A collaborative platform for individuals who share a common interest, work, or craft. A CoP can differ from other collaboration formats, particularly through voluntary involvement. A key feature of this involvement is peripheral participation, in which members' level of involvement can change or involve. The primary structures of a CoP are domain, community, and practice (Wenger et al., 2002. These are pervasive, but intangible concepts that encapsulate everything from academic expectations to students and staff interactions. Together, they can have an enormous impact on the school community.

Inclusive school-A educational setting characterized by "accepting, understanding, and attending to student differences and diversity, which can include the physical, cognitive, academic, social, and emotional" (McManis, 2017, para. 3). A school in which "all students can be full participants in their classrooms and in the local school community" (McManis, 2017, para. 2).

Special education-The practice of providing education for students with special needs that allow them to access the curriculum. Special education attempts to education students while addressing their individual physical, social-emotional and mental health needs with a continuum of services.

Co-Teaching-An instructional model in which two teachers, a special education teacher and general education teacher, share planning, instruction and assessment of students "often implemented with general and special education teachers paired together as part of an initiative to create a more inclusive classroom" (Trites, 2017, para. 2).

CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Establishing the importance of culture is essential to this study. In this review, I attempt to articulate that culture is a powerful force that has the ability to attract or repel. Culture provides the context of what takes place in individual or collective lives. Research will be presented demonstrating how culture impacts schools and students. This will include the development of culture in a newly opened school. As a CoP is a form of a collaborative team, the importance of effective collaboration will be noted. Finally, research will be shared on the characteristics of Communities of Practices to help establish its unique role and how they are qualified to be an effective engine to impact department culture.

Culture

The power of culture is difficult to overstate. "The culture of an enterprise plays the dominant role in exemplary performance" (Deal & Peterson, 2003, p. 52). Research from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology on effective group-based projects found the most successful groups shared three characteristics: social sensitivity to one another, all group members could participate in a meaningful way, and finally, the most successful groups have more women in them (Heffernan, 2015). This final element might well be attributed to the fact that women traditionally score higher on empathy scales (Heffernan,

2015). Regardless, successful groups understood that "what happens between people (social connectedness) is what matters" (Heffernan, 2015, p. 15).

The growing diversity of the nation contributes to the principle of culture as an issue of social justice. Genuine inclusion is the most important social justice issue today. While not completely decided by schools, it must be a priority for our schools because our nation's "institutions teach by example the values which will prevail; inclusion or segregation and exclusion" (Villa & Thousand, 2016, p. 20). Simply put, schools must persistently and aggressively pursue inclusion or fail to claim inclusion as part of its culture. This means accepting transcending an inclusive culture as a "value and belief system" (Villa & Thousand, 2016, p. 12) rather than a set of strategies or worse, quotas to be met. It can be daunting that culture, so massively important, can be difficult to define, and that paradoxically an element so essential is concurrently both invisible and the most identifiable aspect of a school. Additionally, it has been noted that the formation of a culture is inevitable. These factors give an urgency to the attention of a new school's culture formation- "a new school develops its own culture; all of the actions that manifest the formation of that culture are magnified in its beginnings" (Stine, 1999, p. 14).

In addition to its inevitable nature, culture is resistant to change. Indeed, even under ideal circumstances changing a school culture is difficult and may take several years to accomplish (Waldron & McClesky, 2007). Bolman and Deal (2003) place culture within a symbolic framework and emphasize the meaning of events and rituals. Strong cultures have "myths, stories, rituals, and ceremonies that help align employees and reinforce a common goal" (p. 254). Despite the combination of culture's importance, its inescapable development, and its obstinacy to reform, it is fair to estimate that there is

a paucity of school focus on the development of its culture. These facets also point to the importance of how culture develops in newly opened schools.

Inclusive Culture

The importance of creating an inclusion school culture is paramount. Studies consistently "converge on the consistent finding that perceiving a sense of belonging or connectedness with one's school is related to positive academic, psychological, and behavioral outcomes during adolescence" (Anderman, 2002, p. 796). Further, "although different researchers operationalize and study belonging in various ways, there is a consensus among a broad array of researchers that a perceived sense of belonging is a basic psychological need and that when this need is met, positive outcomes occur" (Anderman, 2002, p. 796).

Inclusion and belonging must be more than stated goals. In fact, inclusion as defined can be a complex endeavor. For example, simply increasing the number of students with disabilities in general education classrooms may not address the social interactions that have proven beneficial to students (Stiefel, Shiferaw, Schwartz, & Gottfried, 2017). While it has been observed that "many education stakeholders question whether inclusion adequately addresses the needs of SWD (students with disabilities)" (Stiefel et al., 2017, p. 106), this might be attributed to the failure to first properly define inclusion as well making inclusion a comprehensive aspect of a school. This is important because of the potential benefits of a culture that considers all aspects of inclusion. Additionally, teachers also benefit from an inclusive school as "self-worth can arise only when an individual is grounded in community" and that teacher commitment is dependent on a "sense of belonging" (Moores-Abdool & Voigt, 2007, p. 70).

Culture in newly opened schools. There is great potential in newly opened schools to create a new, dynamic culture. The facilities are clean and new, the community, as well as teachers and students, are generally enthusiastic, as optimism abounds. And with the opening of a school, as in any gathering of individuals, invariably, unfailingly, a culture will begin to emerge:

> From the day a new school forms, well before the opening day of class, culture begins to be established. Each member of a new school brings their personal norms, values, and beliefs to the newly forming group. In absence of a directed effort to shape the culture of a newly forming school, the cultural norms, values, and beliefs of everyone will coalesce over time to form a new organizational culture. (Stine, 1999, p. 27)

When does the culture of a new school develop? Like the pioneer species of new ecosystems that lead to succession, culture begins with an interview, a conversation, the first collaboration. Important cultural impact can be the choice of an office or classroom, informal discussion about curriculums (or weather or politics). From a leadership perspective, it is now principals will take definitive and long-lasting actions. If Sergiovanni's (1994) contention that "the ultimate purpose of school leadership is to transform the school into a moral community" (p. 45), it is now that the transforming will have the greatest impact for effectiveness. Culture, while certainly sharing similarities across schools, will be unique. As Wheatley (2006) wrote:

> "I no longer believe that [school organizations] can be changed by imposing a model developed elsewhere. So little transfers to, or even inspires, those trying to work at change in their own organizations…There is no objective reality out there

> waiting to reveal its secrets. There are no recipes or formulae, no checklists or advice that describe reality. There is only what we create through our engagement with others and with events. Nothing transfers; everything is always new and different and unique to each of us" (pp. 8-9).

It must be emphasized: culture will invariably emerge. While the organic development of culture is undeniable, it is also true that it can be cultivated, guided, and given direction. In fact, it is imperative that attention be given to culture in newly opened schools. Two elements contribute to this need. First, culture's intractable nature—culture can be persistent and difficult to change. Second, culture's impact as members join the organization. Culture

> "represents the collective knowledge of our predecessors. It is perpetually as new members are introduced into the community. New members are given direction on how to define and respond to problems, in addition to how to master new events by assimilating them into the situations of meaning they have already acquired" (Holmes, 2009, p. 12).

Developing a distinct community and identity is critical because "there is a profound connection between identity and practice. Developing a practice requires the formation of a community whose members can engage with one another and thus acknowledge each other as participants" (Wenger, 1998, p. 162).

As a critical part of a school's identity, culture is determined by both the professional practices and interactions that are actively practiced, as well as those that are not practiced (Wenger, 1998). Identity and practice are mirror images so that one "inherits the texture" of the other (Wenger, 1998, p. 162). The situation is clear: a new

school's culture will inevitably develop, it will have enormous impacts on new members, and once established, it will be difficult to change.

Out of many: Merging cultures. One of the biggest challenges in helping establish a new school's culture is that all members will inherently be new and will therefore bring expectations reflective of other contexts. These cultural behaviors and norms are powerful and hold significant meaning. Many times, new schools attempt to hire the "brightest and the best." A lofty goal but lost is the implication that these individuals have excelled for a considerable time by helping build and contribute to their previous school and its culture. This can make creating a new culture more difficult. This challenge of "developing culture at a newly opened school is merging the preexisting cultures from the schools reassigned to the new site" (Holmes, 2009, p. 7). These preexisting cultures from previous sites are strong and meaningful and may "represent the only, and therefore the natural and inevitable, way to be and to do things" (Holmes, 2009, p. 8).

Collaboration

The quality of collaboration is a critical element in any successful school. Both the Consortium on Chicago School Research and the National Center for Educational Achievement have found similar results: that "a new set of approaches that would promote effective teamwork and intensively collaborative practices" are vital to school reform (Strauss, 2013, para. 3). Importantly, low-income schools demonstrate both the greatest need and the greatest benefit from "deep collaboration" (Strauss, 2013, para. 4). Goddard. Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, (2007) found that teachers who worked together in collaborative teams had more skill variety, knowledge of student performance, and

knowledge of colleagues' work. Teachers involved in collaborative decision-making are more likely to take interest and ownership in finding solutions to common problems (Goddard et al., 2007). It is important to frame the importance of school culture and collaboration to the most vulnerable students.

First, collaboration is consistently identified as a contributing factor in the success of all students. In the field of special education, "the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA has made collaboration a required part of special education services" (Friend & Cook, 2010, p. 20). Collaboration in special education is "imperative" so that "special education teachers be made aware of effective collaboration procedures and what makes a good collaborative team" (Friend & Cook, 2010, p. 21). Research has also identified the importance of proactive collaboration in meeting the needs of marginalized students, including those needing support for learning needs, cultural and language differences, and socio-economic challenges (Akin & Neumann, 2013). By the nature of qualifying as special education, each student, and their family, if they are under the age of 18, will have participated in a process that includes a special education eligibility sign-off, an eligibility meeting, and an Individualized Education Program (IEP). These all include a school-based team. This means these students and their families will be dependent on a school having both an effective collaborative culture as well as an effective special education department; there is a relationship between effective collaboration and producing a quality IEP (Clark, 2003). All too often special education students face schools that fail to inspire hope and aspirations.

Effective collaboration. The importance of collaboration is well-established. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards and the National Commission on

Teaching and America's Future believes that instructional quality and school effectiveness depend on how well teachers collaboratively work together in a professional environment (Gajda & Koliba, 2008). This has a direct relation to the importance of a CoP. Hattie (2009) has found that collaboration promotes student learning. Additionally, "teacher collaboration, inquiry, and shared decision-making advance bottom-up improvement of instructional technique and motivation of educators to facilitate student learning" (Gates & Robinson, 2009, p. 145). However, much like culture, “collaboration” and “communication” are vulnerable to being one of many empty words used in education, ideas and ideals that are accepted as desirable, but never quantified. In other words, not enough attention is given to exactly define effective collaboration and how to evaluate current collaboration teams. Collaboration occurs in a variety of ways but does not necessarily result in teacher learning or improved practice, even when the collaboration focuses on teacher and student learning (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Van Es, 2012). The question then is what is effective collaboration? This question is critical because effective does not happen by chance but rather through planning and effort (Sherer & Barmore, 2015). Research indicates that policy-driven collaboration was problematic in that the result was often a lack of relevance and local ownership (Sherer & Barmore, 2015).

While research is strong that school environment and culture have a strong impact on student learning, “imperial research only *suggests* collaboration influences academic achievement” (Sherer & Barmore, 2015, p. 20). There is evidence that student learning is improved when teachers collaborate with more experienced and effective colleagues (Jackson & Bruegmann, 2009). There have also been studies indicating that both teacher

social capital (measured by social ties within the school as well as supportive professional environments) have positive effects on teacher effectiveness and student learning (Kraft & Papay, 2014; Pil & Leana, 2009). However, because “all collaborations are not equal—or equally productive” (Ronfeldt, Owens, Farmer, McQueen, & Grissom, 2015, p. 479), it is critical that elements of successful collaboration are identified. Further, ineffective collaboration hindered teachers’ efforts to improve their practices (Kaniuka, 2012). It is therefore critical that elements of successful collaboration are identified. However, the true impact of teacher collaboration is rarely investigated (Goddard et al., 2007). There is a need for a deeper understanding of the collaborative process, as “the act of planning and working together, by itself, is a powerful professional development tool” (Brownell, Adams, Sindelar, Waldron, & Vanhover, 2006, p. 169). Much of the collaboration in schools is in the form of department meetings. To lend depth to these meetings, they are sometimes identified as Professional Learning Communities or Collaborative Learning Communities. However, these meetings are almost always mandatory. This can be a critical hindrance to effective collaboration and lead to a "contrived congeniality" (DuFour, 2011, p. 58). Research from several fields indicate that mandated or “top-down collaboration” not only compromises, but also prevents authentic communication and interactions (Conaway, 2016; Flessner & Stuckey, 2014). Further, mandated and overly regulated collaboration damages collegiality and ignores the individual, unique ways meaningful communication can emerge. This does not mean leadership can make collaboration completely voluntary; Professional Learning Communities (PLC), Collaborative Learning Teams (CLT) and so forth are important aspects of academic departments.

Unbalanced collaboration. When promoting collaboration, it is often framed as the antithesis and solution to "silos." For example, we are warned that, "silos stifle communication and prevent teams from working together to achieve organizational objectives" (Steimle, 2016, para. 1). However, silos can and should be a part of a collaborative culture. Conaway (2016) reminds us we should remember to praise the silo as places of reflective, deep thinking, and concentration that are necessary for both individual efficacy and participation in collaborative efforts. Despite the promise of collaboration bringing diverse views together to create a greater impact from individual effort, collaboration is not inherently positive. Most collaboration is unevenly distributed. In most cases, "20% to 35% of value-added collaborations come from only 3% to 5% of employees" (Cross, Rebele, & Grant, 2016, p. 37). This is supported by what is referred to as the "extra-miler(s)"—the team member(s) who exert "disproportionate influences" on overall team outcomes. This results in collaborative work that is "often lopsided in companies because those more willing naturally take it on (and receive requests to do so), and how women (due to the caregiver stereotype) tend to bear more of the burden" (Cross et al., 2016, p. 40). Collaboration is not a panacea nor inherently positive; rather, *effective* communication can contribute to successful organizational dynamics. Individual work that takes place in the straw man silos is not the adversarial strawman to justify collaboration for its own sake. This work must be a part of a collaborative culture.

The alternative is a constant attempt to collaborate. This idealized "escalating citizenship," only results in greater demands placed on top collaborators, creating a "virtuous cycle that soon turns vicious as helpful employees become institutional bottlenecks: Work doesn't progress until they've weighed in. Worse, they are so

overtaxed that they're no longer personally effective" (Bolino, Turney, & Bloodgood, 2002, p. 527). What is needed is "a workplace culture that values and continually optimizes both its silos and its collaborations" (Bolino et al., 2002, p. 528). It has been suggested that bad collaboration is much worse than no collaboration. Therefore, given the importance of collaboration, as well as the potential pitfalls of ineffective collaboration, it is critical to have an effective collaborative model when developing an organizational culture.

Co-teaching. Co-teaching is meant to support special education students in a general education classroom. In theory, the co-teaching model is exactly that: two professionals co-teaching the class through a collaborative approach. All too often co-teaching results in the special educator being treated as a junior partner, relegated to supporting special education students who are often begrudgingly accepted in the classroom to start with. A major focus of the special education department is to make certain that a co-teaching model is established that recognizes the expertise of both professionals that supplement one another to provide "comprehensive, effective instruction" (Beninghof, 2016, p. 12).

Communities of Practice

CoPs can be loosely defined as "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems or a passion about a topic, and who share their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger, McDermontt, & Snyder, 2002, p. 4). However, this definition does not capture the potential and actual power of CoPs. For example, while the resurgence of the Chrysler Corporation in the late 1980s is well-known, the role that the development of CoPs played in the company's rebirth is less

publicized. A restructuring of manufacturing practices, while showing initial success, only found lasting acceptance and results when former and current colleagues from various functional areas began to meet informally (Wenger et al., 2002. As the value of these informal meetings became evident, managers at Chrysler made a monumental decision, one that may have gone against inherent managerial instincts: while they would sanction and support the meetings, they would resist the urge to formalize them (Wenger et al., 2002). Thus, rather than creating a "new matrix structure" that produce expected reports in a standard new format, they would allow these "emerging knowledge-based groups" to grow and develop organically (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 6). The results that emerged from these self-generated "Tech-Clubs" changed the organization and its culture. Since that time, CoPs have been recognized as a potent tool and been utilized in schools, hospitals and organizations as diverse as the World Bank, Shell Oil, and McKinsey & Company (Wenger et al., 2002). CoPs have several features that address potential concerns and obstacles to ineffective collaboration, as well making it a particularly effective model to influence organizational culture.

The concept of a CoP was originally proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991). They focused their research on social learning rather than the then dominant cognitive approach. They proposed that learning is not the "passive reception of knowledge; it is a social phenomenon where involvement in the practice being studied is key to learning" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 17). Subsequent research has demonstrated the importance of informal relationships and interactions to learning. Much of our daily work is

> "narrative, that is, storytelling and relating anecdotes are a legitimate form of knowledge sharing and contributor to problem solving, and are a part of the work,

not an addition to it. Much of work is tacit and situational, requiring improvisation" (Orr, 1990, p. 12).

Furthermore, the literature suggests that the purpose of a school-based Community of Practice is to learn about how to improve instruction and performance across a system. This supports Senge's (1991) idea of "systems thinking" as one of the five disciplines of a learning organization, emphasizing that leaders consider the whole organization rather than its individual parts. Additionally, Fullan (2007 promotes a focus on system change. Leaders are responsible for this function as they are uniquely positioned to work on systemic improvement.

Lave and Wenger (1991) advocated a "theory of learning whereby people learn by becoming acknowledged, but peripheral, members of social communities where knowledge resides, not as abstract ideas, but as embodied and shared practices" (p. 29). They suggested a concept of learning as "the process of joining a community and actually taking part in its practices, beginning with the most basic and gradually mastering the most complex, while working alongside established members" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 33). In this way, newcomers gradually learn and adopt to change their identity to those inside the community. Later researchers proposed that "despite their near-invisibility" communities of practice were the important element to "effective workplace learning and innovation" and therefore "constituted an important concern for managers, especially in knowledge-based organizations" (Brown & Duguid, 1991, p. 45).

Voluntary Collaboration

One of the critical features of CoP is that the ties and cohesion that binds them are not the mandatory meetings that mark other collaborative efforts such as department

meetings. Rather, the cohesive factor is the identification that all members of a CoP are practitioners of their chosen work, or practice. Thus, members "develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short, a shared practice" (Wenger-Traynor & Wenger-Traynor, 2015, para. 4). There should be a shared passion around which the CoP revolves. Further, each member should, to some degree, recognize the shared interests of the CoP as part of their individual sense of self. For example, teachers within a CoP would recognize the significant role that being an educator plays in their life. This is not to say that mandatory meetings or collaboration is not important. Indeed, their importance can be important parts of a school or department communication systems regarding information sharing, expectations, and routine conflict resolution. However, these mandatory meetings, often run and facilitated from a clear leader with a defined agenda are not always in the spirit of CoPs. As even the most experienced professionals are "constantly learning as they go about their daily work and much of this learning bears little relation to, and is often at odds with, formal training and canonical work procedures" (Brown & Duguid, 1991, p. 32), other forms of collaboration are needed. The informal nature of CoPs is important. They can greatly increase the expertise and ability of group members through what Wenger (1998) calls "*knowledge stewarding* responsibilities" but only if management is "socially sensitive and is careful not to stifle their self-organizing drive" (p. 10). Research has proposed that flexible structures (Bresman & Zellmer-Bruhn, 2013), autonomy (Haas, 2010), and permeable boundaries (Gibson & Dibble, 2013) for building on the expertise and skill set of individual members to create an increased synergy

(Nistor, Daxecker, Stanciu, & Diekamp, 2014). There are several ways CoPs can differ from traditional organizational collaboration:

- "emergent" rather than mandated, task missions;
- voluntary, as opposed to assigned, membership;
- naturally evolving and often shared leadership;
- relatively low task interdependencies;
- fluid internal structures;
- accountability to internal, as opposed to external, stakeholders;
- resources supplied by the community itself, rather than the parent organization. (Raven, 2013, p. 295)

An important element of CoPs, therefore are that they are untraditional, "multifaceted entities that are not uniform in structure or nature" with a flexibility that allows them to be "designed for a variety of different purposes" (Raven, 2013, p. 296).

While research suggests that management can play a role in helping initiate a CoP and certainly provide support and establish credibility, attempts to control communities of practice and "demanding certain deliverables, can simply transform them into organizational units (teams or task forces), and worse create separate, even divisive collections" (Gongla & Rizzuto, 2004). While initiating or "seeding" efforts can be effective to CoP, several studies indicate a natural "reluctance of community of practice members to maintain their commitment when management attempts to control the learning agenda of the community" (Wenger et al., 2002 p. 20). Too much interference will result in what might be called phantom CoPs as the community that faces increasing centralized control may decide to "remove itself completely from the organizational radar

screen and continue to function off-site or outside work hours to preserve its independence and avoid management-imposed assignments" (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 21). While these phantom CoPs may still prove beneficial to organizational learning, they are divorced from the administration and management and may have an inherently conflicted relationship.

In one study, management sought to formalize an effective CoP by making financial incentives and evaluation elements "contingent on their performance in their assigned community of practice" (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 25). The study found members were not motivated to spend extra time or effort in their assigned communities of practice. What they did choose to do instead was create and spent time on "bootlegged, unofficial communities of practice where they were free to pursue their passion" (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 52). In their truest forms, CoP's have a natural tendency to evade control, particularly when its autonomy is threatened. CoPs, therefore, require an administrative approach that is supportive, secure and has a long-range view of a CoP's organizational benefits.

Elements of a Community of Practice. According to Wenger-Trayner (2015), CoPs have three important elements. First, there is the domain: the interest, profession or endeavor around which the community commits itself and distinguishes itself. It is a mutual engagement that creates and binds the community into a social entity. This mutual engagement creates relationships among members; it connects them in ways that can become deeper than merely sharing the same job or interest (Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Second, there is the community or the interactions and relationships that form based on the domain. The community is not bound by formal meetings. Rather, the spirit of the

community permeates both individual and small cells that might emerge from the greater community into a voluntary collective (Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Finally, there is the practice, the "shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, symbols, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems" (Wenger-Trayner, 2015, para. 3).

A requirement for being in a CoP is being included in the relevancy or "shared passion" in the domain (Wenger-Trayner, 2015, para. 1). The inclusion of "shared passion" matters" mirrors Deal and Bolman's (1991) emphasis on meaning, who call it "the most basic human need" (p. 269). This communal aspects to CoPs are a critical element to genuine and effective collaboration.

> "The community element is critical to an effective knowledge structure. Members use each other as sounding boards, build on each other's ideas, and provide a filtering mechanism to deal with 'knowledge overload.' Interpersonal relationships are also critical. Knowing each other makes it easier to ask for help." (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 34).

The progression of a Community of Practice is illustrated in Figure 1.

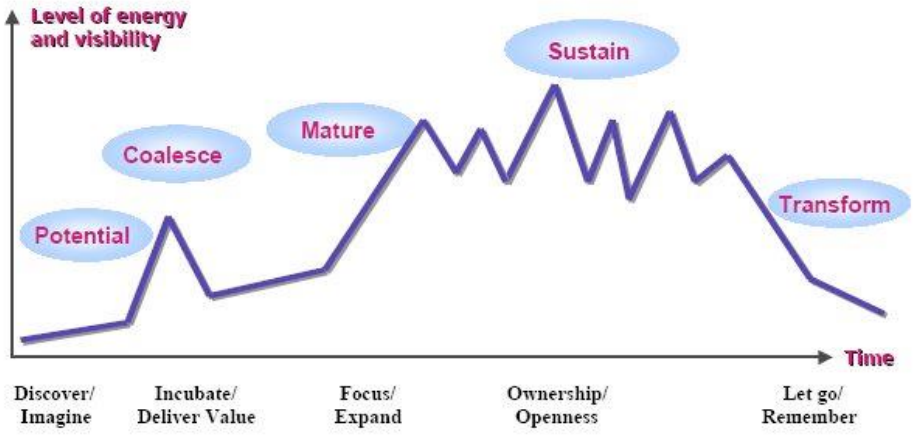

Figure 1. The Evolution of a Community of Practice (Wenger et al., 2002)

Principles of the CoP Model

Wenger et al. (2002) suggests seven critical principles for establishing, cultivating, and evolving communities of practice. They contribute to what is referred to as "aliveness" (p. 53). These principles, with brief descriptions, follow:

1. ***Design for evolution***.

   As CoPs are organic and dynamic in nature, design must reflect flexibility, adaptability, and plans for growth. The primary purpose of design is to "catalyze community development" (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 51).

2. ***Open a dialogue between inside and outside perspectives***.

   A good community design requires the perspective of an insider. However, the perspective of an outsider can prove invaluable. In the case of a school CoP, this may include parents, students, general education teachers, counselors, and so forth.

3. ***Invite different levels of participation***.

   In any community, there exist different levels of participation. This principle recognizes and honors different levels of participation. This principle supports the voluntary nature of CoPs, and rather than to "force participation" (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 57), creates opportunities for observation, participation and insight from peripheral members and even outsiders.

4. ***Develop both public and private community spaces***.

   Members of communities interact with each other in both public and private functions. These interactions are interrelated. "The key to designing community spaces is to orchestrate activities in both public and private spaces

that use the strength of the individual relationships to enrich events and use events to strengthen individual relationships" (Wenger et. al, 2002, p. 59). Planned activities, including those including the student led FIN Friends (a school club created to foster interactions and activities with special education students and general education students) will help support this principle.

5. ***Focus on value.***

   As communities are voluntary, demonstrating value is critical for an incentive to continue membership. This requires the CoP to "create events, activities, and relationships that help their potential value emerge and enable them to discover new ways to harvest it" (Wenger, et al., 2002, p. 60).

6. ***Combine familiarity and excitement.***

   Familiarity and excitement are important for a CoP. However, they can also become competing facets. Familiarity can contribute to coalescing of the group but must be balanced with challenge and spontaneity.

7. ***Creating a rhythm for the community.***

   This principle honors the natural reality of rhythms. As all lives have rhythm, a vibrant community recognizes the "web of enduring relationships" is "influenced by the tempo of rhythms" (Wenger, et. al., 2002, p. 62). It is also important to consider the rhythm of each stage of a community's development.

Dialogue and discussion. Two of the ways CoPs contribute to developing collaboration and culture is through dialogue and discussion. While seemingly self-evident, it is critical to nurture and develop these elements for effective collaboration to

occur (Senge, 1990). It is through dialogue and discussion that colleagues develop "shared understanding, where participants engage in open exploration and deep listening to one another while suspending one's own views and opinions" (Senge, 1990, p. 220). Dialogue should encourage deep listening, questioning and reflection and understanding. This in turn should fuel decision and action through informed discussion in which positions and ideas are presented and defended. These two dynamics should support one another in a cyclical process. However, there exists between dialogue and discussion, or in simplistic terms, planning and action, tension and potential conflict:

> "When personality and work-style differences surface in a meeting, the pressure to move to action tends to reinforce a more convergent, closure-oriented style, as opposed to one which continues to expand possibilities. Although this is useful when a decision finally needs to be made, it is less helpful when the intention is to reflect on practice for learning. Additionally, when one considers the fact that the skills involved in reflection are not as highly valued, and therefore not taught or practiced as much in the action-oriented workplace, it is not surprising that these skills are generally under-developed among organizational members, regardless of personal style differences" (Laiken, 2001, p. 7).

When developing the culture of a school or department, it is important to consider this tension, creating the opportunity for productive conflict (Fullan, Bertani & Quinn, 2004). The creation of a new culture, which will naturally involve an amalgamation, compromise, and deviation from several existing cultures, will invariably involve some conflict. Whether this conflict becomes constructive or destructive can be influenced by organizational practices that enable productive change (DiPaola & Hoy, 2001). CoP's can

provide a sheltered forum that can balance the natural tension between dialogue and discussion. An effective CoP, particularly in the first year of a school, will encounter some element of conflict. Within this forum, cognitive conflict can contribute to the necessary change and development of a first-year school.

> **Participation and trust.** It is important that a CoP interacts regularly. As interacting regularly, members develop a shared understanding of their domain and an approach to their practice. In the process, they build valuable relationships based on respect and trust. Over time, they build a sense of common history and identity. If a community of practice doesn't come together regularly, or participation is spotty, it is difficult to create momentum for the work. (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 35)

However, the danger of mandating CoPs is that a "culture of compliance" undermines the dynamic energy that should be its lifeblood (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 35). More important than the quantity of a CoP's participation is its quality. The meaning within a Community of Practice is achieved through "the interplay of participation and reification, the symbiosis that results from taking part in communication, activities, and events, and making ideas and concepts less abstract and more real" (Bozarth, 2008, p. 51). Wenger (1998) stresses a respectful and balanced relationship between participation and reification; too much participation without reification can lead to talking, planning and discussion but without action or follow through, while an imbalance of reification can result in a dearth of rich dialogue and deep reflection. Additionally, CoPs should be strongly imbued with trust. Along with energy and passion, trust is crucial for effective collaboration and thus the development and functioning of a CoP (Bryk & Schneider,

2003; Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999; Pattinson & Preece, 2014). Like culture, trust can be difficult to define due its complexity (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Additionally, trust cannot be assumed or "can no longer be taken for granted in schools. It must be conscientiously cultivated" (Tschannen-Moran, 2004, p. 12). It must be "cultivated through speech, conversations, commitments and actions" (Soloman & Flores, 2001, p. 122). For a CoP, trust and empathy are "the building blocks for relationships that unite members" (Pattinson & Preece, 2014, p. 140).

Along with other benefits, trust within a CoP leads to social capital. Social capital is "the glue that holds a community together; it is the shared knowledge, understanding, skills and offers of help needed to achieve shared goals, or help someone solve a problem" (Pattinson & Preece, 2014, p. 142). When a school opens, its social capital is in a state analogous to potential energy: impressive experience and talent that has not yet demonstrated a synergy or collaborative impact. A CoP encourages both *bonding* social capital that provides a cohesion and rapport between members of a community and *bridging* social capital that enables communities to reach out to each other (Pattinson & Preece, 2014). Lesser and Storck (2001) identified four specific ways CoPs lead to outcomes that relate to dimensions of social capital: connections between people, relationships that build a sense of trust, mutual obligation, and a common language and context that is shared by community members. In these respects, CoPs are "like an engine for developing social capital" (Pattinson & Preece, 2004, p. 148).

Defining the Community in a CoP. If a CoP is to have meaning as a legitimate part of establishing a school's culture and identity, it must quantify itself as more than informal meetings with colleagues. While some freedom should exist to differentiate

from more traditional work-related collaborative teams, CoPs must have some elements to give it definition and coherence. Wenger (1998) describes three elements that both define and bind the community within a CoP. The first element is an accepted joint enterprise, an agreed upon focus and interaction that creates a sense of mutual accountability and respect (Wenger, 1998). A second component is mutual engagement: building relationships, facilitating productive conflict, and creating a shared repertoire. What is important about mutual engagement is that while CoPs create a forum for newcomers to learn and become acclimated to an existing culture, they also remain aware of potential power issues within its membership (Wenger, 1998). Finally, the community has a shared repertoire, the "community's accumulated stories, artifacts, historical events, or concepts" (Wenger, 1998, p. 80). Each of these elements are related and supplementary to each other. The correlation between participation in a CoP and a developing culture is that it transforms "who we are and what we can do…It is not just an accumulation of skills and information, but a process of becoming or avoiding becoming a certain person" (Wenger, 1998, p. 215). By extension, that means becoming or avoiding a certain school.

Summary

A CoP can contribute to the culture of a special education department in newly opened school. This is important for several reasons. First, from a compliance issue it is critical a special education department is well-coordinated, and focused on meeting many legal requirements (timelines, required collaboration of parents, etc.) Just as importantly, the department needs to quickly develop a culture that addresses the education and social-emotional needs of the special education students. This is important because the

achievement gaps, and disproportionate disciplinary actions taken against special education students are pernicious (Heasley, 2015). Students with disabilities score 32-42 points below state assessment tests, a gap that has remained stable (Heasley, 2015). Graduation rates for special education students remain approximately 20% lower than general education students, while in 20 states, the graduation rate for students with disabilities is lower than 60%, "the threshold commonly used to identify schools as dropout factories" (Grindal & Schifter, 2016, para. 3). Further, students with disabilities face out of school suspension at twice the rate of general education students (Heasley, 2015).

The academic and disciplinary woes facing special education students contribute to significant social issues. For example, special education students are vulnerable to being involved in the juvenile justice system. Between 40% and 70% of juvenile delinquents are estimated to have disabilities ranging from learning disabilities to emotional disabilities. Subsequently, both men and women with disabilities are "dramatically overrepresented in the nation's prisons and jails today" with "three times as likely to report having a disability as the non-incarcerated population, while those in jails are more than four times as likely" (Vallas, 2016, para. 4). This creates a devastating cycle: African-American students, who can face disproportionate identification as students with disabilities, are more likely to be in jail, prison, or on parole than in college (Vallas, 2016). The growing number of special education students who are also English Language Learners will be prone to these same discrepancies and inequities unless addressed. A new school has a unique opportunity to approach these issues by developing positive, productive relationships with all members of the school community. Neither

these relationships nor the inclusive, dynamic culture necessary to address these deficits emerge by chance.

There are several ways the special education department will be attempting a system-based response to these issues. First, it should be committed to a consistent process of informing parents about the special education process and the options that are available to them, even when some of those options are antithetical to specific strategies administrators and teachers may desire. A culturally-based department seeks to provide parents to have more education, not less, about all aspects of the special education process, to be prepared to have "informed, constructive and nuanced dialogue" about what is happening to their child (Tyre, 2011, p. 18). While seemingly a natural response, the consistent goal of treating families as equal, respected members of an educational team can be overlooked in the rush to meet timelines and compliance issues that can dominate the special education process. To truly take the time to treat families with the respect and inclusion they deserve requires a culture that establishes this action as a mandate. A special education department must assume family involvement and education as part of not just its responsibility but woven into its culture. This means recognizing the current state of inequality regarding the amount and depth of information available to families. Then, regardless of the origin and causes of this inequality, developing a commitment to respond in a culturally responsive manner to address it.

Another critical way a CoP can contribute to the culture of a special education department is by integrating several aspects that may impact its members but without effective collaboration will be ransom and unquantified. For example, co-teaching "presumes that both educators actively participate in the delivery of instruction, share

responsibility for all their students, assume accountability for student learning, and acquire instruction resources and space" (Friend, 2008, p. 36).

While the practice should be a "relatively simple strategy for reaching diverse learners" co-teaching is actuality a "sophisticated service option requiring a strong professional commitment and systemic supports" (Friend, 2008, p. 27). While co-teaching is presents considerable challenges, its problems and shortcomings must primarily lie with the failure of special educators and departments to establish expectations of practice and implementation. Additionally, special education departments are unique in the educational milieu. A teacher of students with mild autism might have no regular interaction with a teacher of students with moderate autism, while neither might interact with teachers of students diagnosed with Emotional Disabilities. This lack of collaboration as well as professional and personal relationships weakens the departments and prevents a systems approach to the aspirations of a progressive, dynamic special education department. CoPs respond to this deviation by "increasing knowledge transfer and learning across some natural fragmentation point in the networks—ties across function, physical distance, expertise or key projects" (Cross, et al.,2006, para. 1). CoPs must be more than sharing the flow of information; it "needs to sense and respond to crises or opportunities dynamically, drive emergent innovation, and facilitate relationships that produce value creation" (Friend, 2008, p. 31). To do so, members of the community must be aware of the expertise within its members and know that that this expertise is available as an asset to the entire department. A Community of Practice allows for committed professionals to actively build a culture that both informs and inspires.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Upon opening a new school, it is important to recognize the challenge of developing a new culture, distinct from the disparate cultures new employees will bring from previous schools. Action Research is an appropriate approach to meeting this challenge, as it is "a way of thinking that implies the use of reflection and inquiry as a way of understanding the conditions that support or inhibit change, the nature of the change, the process of change, and the results of change" (Clift, Veal, Johnson, & Holland, 1990, pp. 54-55). Rather than allowing the adaptation of a new culture to develop through chance, the role of the action research practitioner is actively involved in creating the awareness of culture, as well as the interactions and activities that develop an organization culture. This is important for several reasons. First, the intractability of culture, or the difficulty of changing a culture once it has taken root. Second, every new school comes with community perceptions, concerns, and identities. This is particularly true in the age of social media. These perceptions can impact a school's culture. Finally, there is increasing research that demonstrates culture's importance to every aspect of the school. For example, intense attention, research, and debate will be devoted to a new school's hiring process, and rightly so. This is particularly true with new schools in which employment is highly desirable. Once hired, these "best and brightest" teachers will begin to create their department identity, including Community Learning Teams (CLT). However, these departments will be heavily focused toward academic planning, grading

policies, and so forth. Through these interactions, culture, while often not explicitly recognized as a priority, begins its immediate development. While culture cannot be definitively dictated, it can be cultivated, guided, and influenced.

Rationale for Choosing Action Research

For the purposes of this research project, I used action research to study how a Community of Practice contributes to the culture of the special education department. The special education department of Shark Lane High School played an important role in this endeavor by participating in two action research cycles during the first two years of the school's existence. Action research methods were chosen that matched and respected how a new school culture develops: holistically, and organically in ways that respect the individual perspectives that contribute to a developing school culture.

The decision to use action research in this study was motivated by the benefit from participants' involvement in the research process and their investment in the culture they seek to create. This effort differentiates it from traditional research through the involvement of the participants, engaging in "a disciplined process of inquiry conducted *by* and *for* those taking the action" (Sagor, 2000, p. 3). The study of the development of culture requires an active involvement to gain an understanding of its myriad influences, changes, and growth. Culture involves the complex interaction of individuals, a nonlinear, unpredictably collective phenomenon. An interesting paradox is that, despite its collective nature, culture is ultimately determined by individuals (Sagor, 2000). Likewise, action research is a collaborative activity among colleagues that can focus on issues that impact an entire school community. Finally, action research can serve a dual purpose; through the regular practice of participation in an action research study, the

habits of reflection, dialogue, and commitment to action research principles, action research can become a part of school culture.

The action research process is inherently collaborative and allows for investigation into and reflection of the degree practitioners work together. Practitioners should already be involved in the process of inquiry to consistently improve their practice. While this seems axiomatic, the daily demands of expectations for both educators and administrators can create a survival mode in which reflection, growth, and culture become abstract, peripheral elements. Action research is a vehicle for documenting the process of growth, making it a part of daily life, embedding it into the mounting list of responsibilities. It accomplishes this partly through individual investment into the creation and participation in action research. Instead of being asked to be a passive participant in a "research study," action research is created by active co-researchers who acknowledge the importance of the relevant issue to their practice. Sagor (2000) promoted action research as a strategy to "building the reflective practitioner" (p. 7).

Action research inherently promotes collaboration. Because traditional post-positivist research attempts to maintain researcher neutrality by putting distance between the researcher, the problem, and the intervention, it is a poor choice of the study of CoPs and culture. The complexity of culture involves deeply reflective and collaborative elements that would be difficult to study through post-positivist research, with its emphasis on detachment. Collaborative elements of CoPs include individual interactions, including conflicts, reactions to administrative directions, teaching styles, assessment practices, and so forth. Instead, action research is epitomized by collaborative inquiry

and participation by the stakeholders in development of the solution (Herr & Anderson, 2005; Kuhne & Quigley, 1997; Stringer, 2007).

Additionally, action research has a history of application with oppressed populations and the distribution of power. Research with disabled populations are traditionally "done to and on to people with disabilities by non-disabled" that at its "best can marginalize and its worst can exacerbate the experience of disabled people" (Stack & McDonald, 2014, p. 85). This made action research an appropriate choice for developing a special education department that is attempting to create an inclusive school community as they often serve as the voice for their students within a school.

When determining if action research is suitable to building the culture of a special education department the following points must be considered: "What impact will the findings have on the teaching and learning process, and will the findings lead to change and improvement?" (Craig, 2009, p. 31). Further, action research "promotes community among all parties involved in a specific learning situation, leading to results that have the potential to improve conditions and situations for all members of the community" (Craig, 2009, p. 7).

Benefit analysis for the study. The benefits of a Community of Practice can be categorized into three dimensions: individual, community, and organizational (Wenger, et al., 2002). An initial and immediate benefit to individual members of the CoP is information sharing. This is important in the development of a cohesive special education department in the two ways. First, information sharing can inherently contribute to community as a "critical team process that involves members interacting to share ideas, information, and suggestions relevant to the team's task at hand" (Srivastava, Bartol, &

Locke, 2006, p. 1242). The second benefit of a CoP to the department is creating increased cohesiveness and helping prevent some of the natural divisions that can all too often fragment professionals and compromise consistent collaboration. The CoP will encourage interactions between professionals that work with diverse populations within special education. For example, teachers who team teach in general education classrooms, those who teach in self-contained rooms, or those in some combination of the two, will often develop strong collaborative and collegial interactions with content teachers, but have little to no professional ties to teachers of students with Intellectual Disabilities or severe Autism. While professional collaboration with content teachers is healthy and desirable, lack of department cohesion creates a disjointed special education department.

Increasing interactions within the special education department not only strengthens the department but also creates opportunities for both staff and students. For example, one of the burdens faced by teachers of low incidence students is that they can be isolated from their colleagues. Because these students do not change classes or may only leave the teacher for one class (in most cases, adaptive physical education), they remain with the same teacher for the full school day. This can have a negative impact on teachers as "even the students question whether you're a real teacher, and this can be damaging to even the strongest special education teacher's self-worth" (Clare, 2018, para. 7).

Within a CoP, opportunities exist for increased professional interaction, including observations with feedback. Additionally, with greater professional rapport there exists the possibility for students of these teachers to interact. For example, an experienced self-

contained/team math teacher might engage in collaborative dialogue with teachers of students with intellectual disabilities looking to present new and diverse lessons. Alternatively, the ID teacher may be able to suggest differentiation and remedial strategies. This kind of collaborative professional practice aligns with Lave and Wenger's (1991 assertion that learning is important to human identity, and that these learning is a social participation. Benefits of a CoP include a forum for aligned contributions to the development of a new culture. The CoP was intended to heighten the professional standing of the special education department, establish expectations for parent and family communication, foster the implementation of effective co-teaching, as well as shape how special education were represented in the Shark Lane School community.

Finally, the school will benefit from a dynamic special education department that facilities and ensures the inclusion of students with special needs into the many activities and opportunities within the school. Again, special education departments are made up of a range of professional educators with a varying range of access to the greater school community. A team teacher has significant access to academic departments, teachers, and students. This access and collaboration also means access to coaches, club sponsors, and participants in a range of activities. In contrast, some teachers are isolated by location and have limited or inconvenient access to colleagues. These classroom assignment decisions are often based on class size, course content, and student populations served. Special educators are further restricted as their location is highly influenced by the needs of students with disabilities. A CoP is an opportunity to bridge these inequities to access and important relationships, an opportunity to create meaningful professional relationships that can directly impact opportunities for students to participate in a range of activities. It

also presents an opportunity to measure the impact of the CoP: Are students participating in a range of activities, are there interactions between teachers that result in new, meaningful professional exchanges? The actions of the CoP will not only benefit the students with disabilities and their families, but also contribute to the development of an inclusive school culture.

Description of the action research intervention. While collaborative efforts were begun during the school's first year, the CoP has been established within the special education department during the second year of the school's existence. The CoP is based on Wenger et al.'s (2002) community-based model. This model is built on the philosophical foundations of a domain, a community, and a practice. A key component of this model is that different levels of participation are encouraged. This means staff can "float" in and out of the actual CoP while still being able to contribute in a meaningful way to the group's objective at all levels of participation. The five stages of Wenger et al.'s (2002) CoP are potential, coalescing, maturing, stewardship, and transformation (p. 69).

The CoP was formed as part of a first cycle of action research during the school's second year of existence. This was a continuation of first year efforts to establish opportunities for communication and departmental cohesiveness. A meeting was scheduled with department members individually to describe the purpose of a CoP. This was an important step because the CoP was forming as a new collaborative team and it serves a different function than the special education department meetings. In the vocabulary of the school, the regular department meetings are considered a Professional Learning Community (PLC). These are primarily common planning meetings, where

ideally data and strategies are evaluated. Additionally, within PLCs there are separate Collaborative Learning Teams (CLTs). For example, within the mathematics department, there are individual CLTs of Algebra, Geometry, and so forth. The function of these collaborative teams is to develop assessments, analyze data and academic planning. While a PLC's purpose is to address student performance and planning, the CoP includes informal learning—specifically storytelling as a means of sharing knowledge (Brown & Dugu, 1991).

Once the CoP was established in the first action cycle, all members were surveyed as to their perceptions of school culture. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in both small groups and individually during this cycle to gather preliminary data for reflection and agenda setting. During an analysis of first cycle data, attention was given to similarities and differences between survey responses and interview results. Additionally, monthly meetings of the CoP focused on the emerging culture of the department.

The special education PLC serves an important structural function during the first years of the school, as standards are set regarding special education compliance, specifically how IEPs are being honored, as well as timelines and record keeping maintained. There are meaningful ways the PLC and CoP naturally support one another and share significant goals. However, there are important differences between the two collaborative groups. First, PLCs are mandatory meetings, while a CoP relies on volunteer collaboration. The monthly PLC is focused on disseminating information and updates. It is primarily run by the department chair and the administrator in charge of the department. By contrast, the CoP served as a collaborative effort to discuss the

development of department and school culture. Discussions focused on professional interactions of educators, student access, and culturally responsive treatment of special education students. Communicating the significant differences to participants was an important part of the initial recruitment effort. Educators were presented with these differences so that they might understand the aims of the CoP.

The special education chair played an important role in both the PLC and CoP. However, while both intra-department collaborative teams supported the development of the special education department, the sole purpose of the CoP was the development of the department's culture. Given that both forms of collaborative teams existed simultaneously, it was important to "gain an understanding of the differences between the models more deeply" so it "will help these same professionals make more informed decisions as to what aspects they should and should not incorporate into their customized set of interventions" (Blankenship & Ruana, 2007, p. 1).

Action Research Model

Because of the cyclical nature of this study, it is important to use a model that respects both reflections and reactions to theater of culture. This requires a community-based action research model that takes into consideration that culture involves individual participation and "considers people's history, culture, interactional practices, and emotional lives" (Stringer, 2007, p. 17). Stringer's (2007) action research model is "based on the assumption that knowledge inherent in people's every day, taken-for-granted lives has as much validity and utility as knowledge linked to the concepts and theories of the academic disciplines or bureaucratic policies and procedures" (p. 18). Stringer makes it clear that community action research is "not a panacea but rather reveals and represents

people's experience, providing accounts that enable others to interpret issues and events in their daily lives" (p. 18). It is also a model that encourages a collaborative approach. Stringer's model provides a Look, Think, Act framework (Figures 2 & 3).

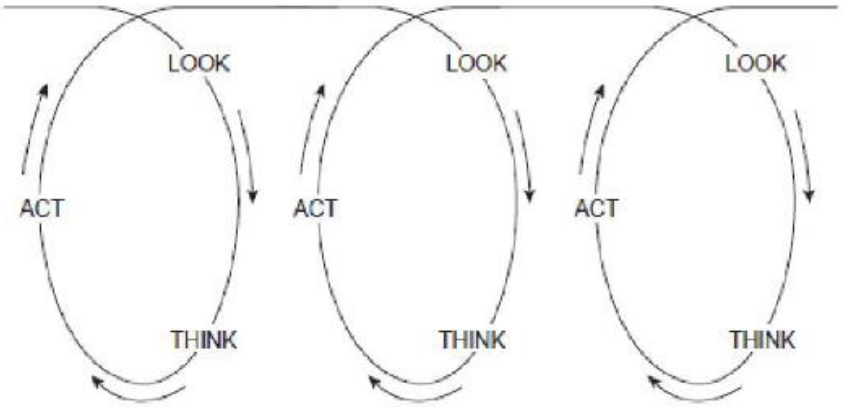

Figure 2. The process of Springer's action research look, think, act spiral. (Stringer, E. (1999). *Action research.* Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.)

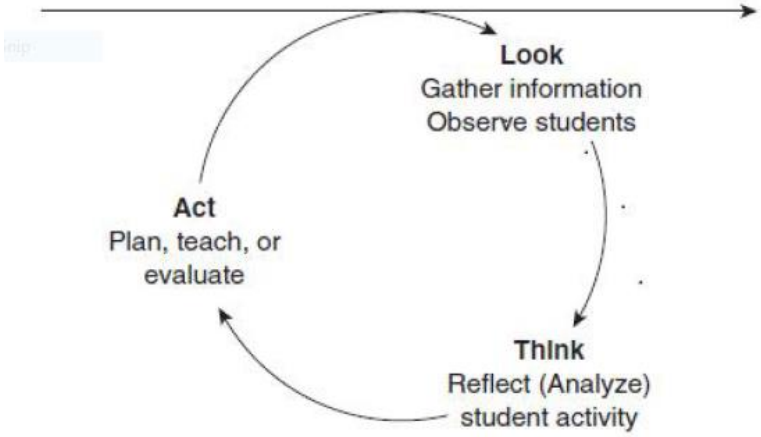

Figure 3. A descriptive description of the action research look, think, act cycle. (Stringer, E. (1999). *Action research.* Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications).

This non-linear process has two major strengths regarding the study of culture. First, it allows for the complex, sometimes disorderly, way groups of people form a culture. Further adding to the model's powerful potential is its ability to address "larger political and cultural systems, and with the ideologies that influence patterns in schools,

as well as with more instrumental actions and consequences" (Patterson, Baldwin, Araujo, Shearer, & Stewart, 2010, p. 147). The fluidity of the model is incorporating the premise that culture emerges from the fact that "societies are complex configurations of many people engaged in overlapping and interlocking patterns of relationship with one another" (Sawyer, 2007 p. 1). Because an emerging culture will involve complex interactions, any model selected will need to be able to account with "individual actors and groups are massively entangled and interdependent" with "connections among the parts, the whole, and the greater whole" (Patterson et al., 2010, p. 140). Another prominent feature of the model is that its built in-feedback process allows for reflection and discussion. Feedback in this case means finding meaning. Because the department is, as previously noted, an ecosystem within the greater school community, we can think of it in terms of a complex adaptive system that acts "as a collection of semi-autonomous agents that transact with one another to generate system-wide patterns, patterns that adapt to changing conditions and that sustain over time" (Patterson et al., 2010, p. 140). These patterns can become an emerging culture.

Researcher Positionality

My positionality within this study is two-fold. I serve as a researcher-participant in collaboration with others in the CoP (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Additionally, my role as an employee within the school requires me to carefully delineate between a more formal role within the department and a participatory role in the CoP. Stringer (2007) identifies the action researcher as a "facilitator" or "catalyst" (Stringer, 2007, p. 25). This approach is marked by inquiry that assists the transition from "isolated individuals toward

a collaborative community" as well as offering opportunities for "personal, professional, and institutional transformation" (Herr & Anderson, 2005, pp. 36-37).

I have employed strategies to mitigate the potential for bias and authority in my role as researcher-participant. First, I practice shared leadership. While I initiated the first monthly CoP meetings, I made it clear and understood that any member may call a meeting to address concerns, celebrate successes, and so forth. Second, the meetings were strictly voluntary and carried no penalty for those who chose not to participate. Third, I am an experienced special educator with my own set of values and beliefs about inclusivity related to students with disabilities. In order to acknowledge my own biases and emotions, I kept a reflective journal throughout the study. The purpose was both to record my own thoughts and reflections of the meetings and to reduce some of the bias that I might bring to the analysis process. As a facilitator, the importance of the journal was to read some of my first reactions in the days after a meeting. While there was productive recording of comments and discussion, the journal served as a repository for me to think through some of my own frustrations. This journaling activity was important during the coding process to ensure that the perceptions and experiences of the participants were captured accurately.

Participants

The special education department of Shark Lane High School opened with 13 members. Since as a new school there is no senior class, the department will experience significant growth in its formative years (a 44% increase in its second year). The special education department faculty are responsible for providing instruction to students with disabilities along a continuum of services, including services in the general education

classroom and self-contained classrooms for students with disabilities considered to be of high incidence and low incidence. High incidence disabilities are those that are most prevalent in society (learning and behavior disabilities, high functioning autism, etc.); low incidence disabilities occur less frequently but tend to be more significant (severe intellectual disabilities). Membership in the CoP varied, with attendance at meetings averaging eight members. Coincidently, this was the number of members who initially agreed to be interviewed. Three more teachers asked to be interviewed after the initial round of interviews was completed. Table 3 represents the teacher participants.

Table 3

Special Education Department Experience

Pseudonym	Years Teaching	Incidence
Teacher A	11	High
Teacher B	2	Low
Teacher C	5	High
Teacher D	5	High
Teacher E	11	Low
Teacher F	6	Low
Teacher G	18	Low
Teacher H	1	High
Teacher I	6	*Department Chair*
Teacher J	5	High
Teacher K	18	High
Teacher L	3	High
Teacher M	0	High

Data Sources

The data sources were qualitative in nature. These sources included Community of Practice artifacts in the form of meeting agendas and minutes. Interviews were conducted with teacher participants. For this study, the researcher provided participants with the opportunity to review themes and findings that emerged from the data collected, including themes and subthemes noted from interview transcripts. Participants were given the opportunity to provide feedback on the accuracy and credibility of these findings. Membership in the CoP has varied, with attendance at meetings averaging eight members. Coincidently, this was the number of members who agreed to be interviewed (three more teachers asked to be interviewed after the initial round of interviews).

Artifacts. The first action research cycle of the school's second year and the evolution of the Community of Practice itself produced artifacts in the form of meeting agendas and meeting minutes**.** Because informal and non-mandatory collaboration and communication had been a guiding philosophy of department leadership from the opening of the school, the hope was that this approach would benefit the CoP. Participation by all members of the special education department was encouraged. The evolution of CoP is important because this participation served as a "source of identity" to "create mutuality within the community" (Wenger, 1998, p. 57). This participation involved all kinds of relations, "conflictual as well as harmonious, intimate as well as political, competitive as well as cooperative" (Wenger, 1998, p. 56). However, this encouragement did not compromise the decision to make the CoP voluntary. For the sake of this study, the voluntary nature of this study was an essential element of genuine collaboration. As a "community-based knowledge initiative," the CoP began as a social

movement. This built "momentum" and created "a pull that does not feel forced" (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 195). Monthly meetings were held to discuss the development of the department's culture as well as its role within the school community. Additionally, members were encouraged to engage in discussion and further the development of department culture within team or small "cells" that originated organically. I requested that these developments and discussions be shared with me so that I would be aware of ideas, concerns, and so forth. The primary result of these informal discussions was teachers of students of low incidence disabilities remained and continued to meet among themselves. Collaboration about culture outside the CoP was limited. However, I also recognized and accepted that my positionality as an administrator in the school may have influenced the participants' willingness to share. The artifacts included the number of participants, notes, and follow through from the meetings. This measure built on the tendency of qualitative research to include "in-depth methods that focus on watching people in their own territory and interacting with them in their own language, on their own terms" (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996, p. 547).

During the monthly CoP meetings, I sought feedback from faculty on department culture as well as the culture of the school community. Member checking took place by communicating through individual conversations, emails and phone calls in the week following the meetings. The objective was to find consistency between CoP minutes, and independent interviews. For example, it was possible that members of the special education department might express concerns about opportunity gaps for special education students. While wanting to make additional comments, members agreed with original interview answers.

Interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of the CoP. The interview questions focused on their perceptions of culture within the special education department and the general inclusion classes, as well as compliance and treatment of special education in the greater school community. The interviews were conducted using a face-to-face interview protocol, in which the set of questions was asked of every participant in the same order with the option for elaboration and/or follow-up questions as needed (see Appendix A). The interview protocol also included an initial statement regarding the purpose of the study, my position as participant-researcher and with encouragement to speak openly. Informed consent was provided to perspective CoP members (see Appendix B).

I conducted three rounds of interviews based on the stages of CoP development. The interviews took place through the school's second year. The interviews were transcribed as well the as notes taken during the interview. As Holmes (2009) pointed out, we often make sense of our lives through stories. Narrative stories, in this case interviews, provided rich detail, and considered how perceptions can change and evolve. Based in the constructivist framework, the interviews assumed that reality is not to be discovered but rather "constructed by the researcher as a result of his or her interactions with the field and its participants" (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006, pp. 25-35). Additionally, interviews included opportunities for teachers to share stories.

Event participation. Student and teacher participation at events planned and implemented by the CoP were counted and recorded. The ideas for these activities were generated during the CoP meetings as actions designed to integrate and engage students with disabilities and their teachers in the school community.

Data Analysis

This study contains qualitative data. Interviews were coded according to primary themes related to the development of the CoP and the formation of an inclusive school culture. I looked for emerging themes as well as contradictory data. It was fully anticipated that the questions focused on the domains of potential and coalescing would elicit more expansive responsive, while the maturing stages would be more difficult to answer at this point. My interactions focused on the use of thick description "data pulled from participants that produces for readers the feeling that they experience, or perhaps could experience, the events described" (Creswell, 2014, p. 184). Analysis of the data provided a glimpse of how teachers viewed themselves as unique members of the school community as well as how they observed the development of the department and school. Themes included common qualities of special education teachers, the unique nature of special education departments, the current cultures of both the department and the school and specific ways the department can grow.

Action research question one. How does a Community of Practice contribute to the development of culture within a special education department in a newly opened school?

Once the recorded interviews were transcribed, I found meaningful, annotated responses to color code responses.

Once I coded and categorized the responses, I looked for emerging themes, patterns and similar responses, as well as secondary trends. The themes and patterns were shared with the CoP as part of the member-checking process to increase the

trustworthiness of the data analysis process. This analysis was based on coding and a synthesis of CoP meetings, interviews, and resulting events. Of interest in this study was how the department can develop organically to include both natural professional divisions while also developing a unique cohesiveness and professional rapport. It was hoped that the CoP would create interactions and partnerships within the special education department that progressively strengthens both department and school.

Action research question two. To what extent are members of the special education department concerned about the inclusion of special education students in the larger school community? Data for this question were derived from interviews and CoP notes. The notes were coded for emergent themes that represented the importance of the participation of students with disabilities in school events. It was important to facilitate and document the experiences of students with special needs through the conversations and actions of the teacher participants. One of the stated goals of the CoP was to create opportunities for all students to access the facilities within Shark Lane High School. These interactions and opportunities were documented in pictures, written reviews and testimonials. These data are important because of the potential drawbacks of special education for both students and their teachers to being integrated into a larger school environment.

Action research question three. What actions might the CoP engage in the next cycle of action research to foster more inclusive opportunities for special education students? Based on the evolution of the CoP and individual interview responses, the next steps in the action research process were determined.

The research questions, data sources, and the analysis associated with each are described in Table 4.

Table 4

Data Analysis Summary

Research Question	Data Sources	Data Analysis
1	CoP meeting notes	Coding
2	Interviews and CoP notes	Coding
3	CoP directions, notes, interviews	Coding

Delimitations, Limitations, and Assumptions

Delimitations. This study focused on the contributions of a Community of Practice to the development of the culture of a special education department in a newly opened high school. Although other collaborative approaches could have been used to measure the development of departmental culture, a CoP more closely aligned with the dynamics of culture. The CoP approach provided the flexibility and essential prescribed elements to contribute to culture building suitable in a small subset of teachers who are part of a greater whole of a school community. Another delimitation in this study was the choice of an action research inquiry process. The choice of action research was based on its compatibility with CoPs as well as the study of culture. Action research allowed me, as a practitioner, to be involved in and advocate for those practices and interactions that influence culture, but as noted below, also contributed to the potential for bias given my role as an administrator in this context.

The research questions were designed to evaluate the effectiveness of the Community of Practice program in promoting and contributing to the culture of the special education department in their development as a CoP and as contributors to an inclusive school culture. The narrow focus of the research questions and participants does not address the plethora of variables that influence the formulation of a school culture.

Limitations. As described earlier in this chapter, a significant limitation was my role as the organizer of the CoP, researcher, and administrator responsible for special education. These roles had the potential to create tensions within the CoP as well as impact its planned activities. There was concern that as an administrator I might impede members from fully taking ownership of the CoP and its mission. The justification for

keeping the CoP as a voluntary activity was to encourage genuine collaboration. However, this also created potential limitations as not all members of the department participated.

Assumptions. First, I assumed that the participants responded truthfully in their interview responses. Teacher participants were frequently encouraged to lead the CoP and sought out for feedback and input. Teachers were regularly reminded that my role in the CoP was that of participant rather than administrator. I further assumed that teachers participating in the CoP did so in the spirit of collegiality with the belief that it could contribute positively to both the department and the school. Further, I assumed that members of the CoP believed the formulation of a school culture would be a significant contribution to an inclusive school environment. The CoP's mission would be to create a unique, dynamic special education department. I assumed that all members would accept this as a worthy goal and be committed to its fulfillment.

Ethical considerations. Any study involving a marginalized population, in this case those teachers who represent students with special needs, must maintain their integrity and dignity. As a form of participatory research, it is critical that "the inquirer would not further marginalize or disempower the study participants" (Creswell, 2014, p. 88). To that end, while the purpose of the study was to analyze the development of culture in a special education department, it was consistently stressed to participants that this culture should directly benefit students and families through the collaborative actions and interactions of those who work most closely with them and for them.

Additionally, it was important that I communicate in both words and actions the differentiation of my role as a member of the CoP and as the administrator in charge of

special education. This means separating my evaluation of the roles and results of a CoP from my evaluation or other supervisory purposes. Similarly, it was stressed to members of the special education department that the level of their participation in the CoP would not be a consideration in their annual professional evaluation.

Institutional Review Board. After a successful dissertation proposal defense, I submitted a complete application to the College of William and Mary Educational Institutional Review Board (IRB). Upon securing appropriate permission to conduct the study and taking required precautions to protect teacher participants from any potential harm, I conducted the action research plan. Informed consent was required of participants. Interviews were voluntary and conducted in each participant's classroom to encourage participation. I also fulfilled the school division's research application process.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this action research study was to investigate the development of culture within a special education department in a new high school. The goal of the study was to develop a Community of Practice within the department to see the impact of explicit influence on department culture as well as the greater school community. Chapter 3 provided an overview of the methodology of the study, including participants, data sources and data analysis. Chapter 4 will provide an overview of the results of the study and is organized by action research questions. Results of the qualitative analysis of the data collection are described in this chapter. Responses were analyzed by content analysis, looking for phrases and patterns. The questions were developed to align to Wenger et al.'s (2002) characteristics and stages of development of a community of practice's evolution. Additionally, teachers in the special education department were asked to identify elements of Bolman and Deal's (1993) attributes of culture.

Action Research Question One

How does a Community of Practice contribute to the development of culture within a special education department in a newly opened school?

The notes I took from the CoP meetings were analyzed through content analysis, looking for words and phrases indicating emerging patterns related to Bolman and Deal's (1993) cultural attributes: rituals, heroes, stories, norms and sanctions, and the role of humor. I was looking for how the CoP contributed to culture, social participation and

relationship building within attributes of the symbolic framework. The CoP's development within Bolman and Deal's cultural attributes within the symbolic framework are detailed below.

Responses to these attributes of culture reveal a school culture very much in its infancy. Teachers were unsure or brief in their descriptions of these attributes. However, there were some primary themes that emerged. Informal meetings, either on campus or in a social setting, were valued and requested to increase. Attendance at these informal events was inconsistent. However, when a gregarious, popular member of the department was asked to serve as social director and plan events, attendance was noticeably higher. Additionally, this teacher became a core member of the CoP.

Respondents mentioned that the desire to share their stories and experiences with teachers outside the department. Interview questions revealed that perceptions within the school community of special education in general and special education teachers are important. Answers revealed that special education teachers were aware of their unique roles. It can also be surmised that some respondents did not think their skills and contribution to the school were always recognized. One respondent stated that at department meetings of a subject in which she co-teaches, she is often told her strategy or input is "fine for her students" but would not be applicable for general education students. It is reasonable that this kind of professional interaction can lead to special education teacher isolation, particularly coupled with the belief that their attributes and skills are poorly understood by the greater school community.

In response to how culture can impact a school or community, teachers responded that culture can be a deciding factor in what students and teachers experience daily:

- “Culture is important. It’s how we act when we’re here.”
- “Culture impacts everything. For us, it’s really important because unless you have an inclusive culture, our kids are left out.”
- “I am not sure exactly how it impacts a school. I know it’s important. It seems the way it would most strongly impact us is if students feel they belong.”
- “When students talk about being bullied, and not fitting in and all that, I think it’s a culture issue.”

Teachers were aware that culture is important and that explicit, collective attention to it is a worthwhile endeavor. Special education teachers have many interactions and relationships, including students, families, co-teachers as well as the wider school community. The focus of this study was department interactions and relationships. The premise is that to most effectively impact the wider school culture, we first establish a focused department culture. In response to what are the most important interactions and activities need to happen in a special education department, teachers responded that respect and listening were crucial:

- “Making sure we interact in a respectful way is really important.”
- “For co-teachers, the most important interactions are with your co-teacher. That relationship is so important.”
- “The most important interactions are with students and families.”

A theme that emerged during the analysis of the meeting notes related to the participants’ sense of self in a new school. New teaching assignments, while exciting opportunities, were nonetheless stressful and in some cases, even traumatic. For instance, teacher G told of “almost shaking the first time I came in the school. I was so nervous. I

am still nervous sometimes. I just don't know if I belong." Teacher D said "Everything is so big! I thought I had an idea of working in a high school, but this is different. And when nobody knows the answers, you feel that much more lost." What emerged from these stories was that teachers expressing these thoughts and experiences about the transition thought they were the only ones having these feelings: "I thought no one else was having these experiences. Everybody looked so confident and like they knew what they were doing. It's good to hear others had those feelings."

Norms and sanctions. Norms and sanctions, "expected behaviors that are agreed upon by a social group," are important for group cohesion (Crossman, 2018, para. 1). In a new organization social norm "help clarify expectations and identity that provide ways to take meaningful action in the face of ambiguity, unpredictability, and threat" (Bolman & Deal, 1991, p. 270). Certainly, any special education department inherently accepts compliance as a norm and sanction. Important calendars and timelines must be maintained. These timelines require collaboration. For example, the three-year re-evaluation requires three distinct meetings that includes planning and discussion between the administrator, department chair, case manager, and co-teacher. Each school and special education department creates similar but significantly different iterations of this process. And in deciding these differences, important cultural contributions are made. Responding to the question of norms, teachers identified the following:

- "Listening to each other."
- "Showing we care."
- "Making sure we take care of families."

- "I think the way we conduct our meetings are good. We really show a lot of respect for our families"

Along with supporting students in team-taught classes and looking for creating inclusive opportunities for special education students, Certainly, relationship building contributes to organizational norms.

Rituals. While the school is still new, emerging rituals began to emerge, one important one being the CoP meetings themselves. Ironically, the sense of isolation and lack of appreciation often experienced by special education teachers leads to burgeoning rituals and stories. It can also contribute to the humor within the department. Despite the limited time the faculty had been together, the themes suggested that special education teachers have experienced a sense of isolation and viewed themselves as outsiders within the school context. CoP participants expressed a desire to gather together as a department and with other members of the faculty to develop opportunities for purposeful interactions with colleagues as a means of building the strong relationships that shape organizational culture.

A significant contribution that the CoP as ritual has made and can continue to make is not just the social aspect of learning and sharing knowledge, but the shared emotional experience as human beings that invariably impacts all aspects of our lives, including our professional performance and identity. Teacher B expressed this, saying, "It's nice to just be able to talk to other special education teachers. We have a different position in schools, so it's nice to be able to meet and talk". Again, this was a new school with no existing ritual, culture, or traditions. The ritual of collaboration is marked by "expressive activities" where "what occurs on the surface of such activities is not nearly

so important as the deeper meanings that are communicated" (Bolman & Deal, 1991, p. 299). Teachers brought with them experiences and cultural expectations from their experiences in previous schools. Teachers would recall collaborative efforts that became rituals at their previous schools:

- Teacher L: "We used to meet in my class every Thursday for coffee. It was a blast. We also got to know each other and come together as a team."
- Teacher E: "We had donut time! Friday mornings were donuts and coffee. Every Friday. Everybody got there early, and we just spent time talking."

In response to how they imagined their current team could begin to create new rituals focused on of team building, teachers expressed a focus on time and consistency:

- "We just need to find time to get together."
- "I like just talking and hearing from other people. I learn that way. Meetings are important for reminders and updates, but we need to build our team communication with each other."
- "It takes time to build a team. We have to get to know one another and learn to trust one another. It just takes time. We had a really good team at [previous school] but people would come and go, and we had to re-build. We can get there, we just have to make the effort."

Opportunities for building relationships. Members who participated in the CoP supported the implementation of consistent meetings as a means of gathering to build relationships. Members were asked how trust could be developed between members. They responded that:

- "We need to talk to each other, spend time together. It takes time. You can't force it."
- "In special education, trust is really important. If we help each other, support each other, and listen, then we should start to trust each other."
- "Helping each other. Like if someone needs coverage or help with an IEP, these things happen every day, and you will need someone eventually."
- "We just have to get together more."
- "I really like just hearing from other teachers in the department."
- "I didn't think we had anything in common, so it was cool to watch other teachers with their students."
- "We need to see each other regularly. Teachers who share the same students should have common time to discuss the students (not just at their IEP meetings). Teachers should also be able to see each other to touch base with last year's case manager or teacher to see if the student is making the right amount of growth or if we need to change our approach."

Sharing knowledge and expertise are inherently part of the norms and sanctions within a special education department. Additionally, *negotiating* expertise and knowledge among veteran teachers creates norms that will impact departmental culture. In response to how knowledge and expertise can be shared within the department, responses focused on opportunities for both formal and informal interactions:

- "We all have strengths and weaknesses, so we need to be able to rely on each other."

- "Just know you can talk to someone. Right now, I know I can talk to X and Y any time, because we worked together before. It seems we will be able to have that here."
- Most of the time, we share what we know with each other. It happens as we need it. Normally, it doesn't happen at meetings or professional development."

In response to how the special education department can share knowledge with school community, teachers connected how this is important to building an inclusive culture.

- "We have to talk to the general education teachers, so they know and understand accommodations and supports."
- "It's our responsibility to let other people know about disabilities and IEPs. Students and parents rely on us to get this information to the school."
- "Teachers need snapshots [of IEPs] in their hands so they know student's goals and accommodations. But that's not enough. We have to work with teachers on how disabilities can impact students, what that looks like in the classroom, and then how to support those students."
- "When teachers come to our meetings (intervention meetings, eligibility meetings and IEP meetings), we can educate them on what we do. We can educate them and parents at the same time."

While it was mentioned that increasing participation in the CoP was an important goal, members agreed that voluntary participation was beneficial. On two occasions, it was suggested that monthly special education meetings and CoPs be combined. However,

there was concern that compromising the voluntary nature of the CoP would impact the nature of the collaboration:

- "I don't know. I just think if you make people come, they will resent it."
- "I like that's its voluntary. I want to come and be a part. When meetings are mandatory, there are just meetings. I actually want to be here."

In terms of actual culture building, the CoP made strides to create greater interactions between members in which the nature of their students would traditionally prevent collaboration. For example, Teacher E stated at a CoP meeting: "We don't see *anybody* else. I want to talk to other adults!" One idea that emerged from this discussion was to find ways for these teachers to interact with other colleagues. We arranged coffee and donut mornings and invited general education teachers to this wing, so we could meet these teachers and then find potential areas of rapport. We started with the special education department, and then made the decision to expand this invitation to other departments. Teachers who had never seen a self-contained special education classroom or only met co-teaching special education teachers, were able to learn another dimension of their school. These teachers invariably stated that they were always interested in these students but had no idea about how to learn more about them and their teachers. According to discussions with teachers both within and outside the CoP, the impact of these informal interactions has been one of the most meaningful aspects of the CoP.

Heroes. While the department is still developing its identity and leaders, influential members of the department did emerge. Most notably, two teachers demonstrated the influence of humor. Along with using matching costumes during Spirit Week, they created a holiday post card of themselves and passed it out to the school

community. It was very well-received and even more importantly created positive attention to the special education department.

Sense of identity. In the Potential stage of a CoP, teachers were asked to identify common characteristics of special education teachers. According to interview results, the teachers self-identified qualities of compassion, being student-focused, and caring. Additionally, interviewed teachers felt "problem solvers" and "role-models" were prominent features of special education teachers. These qualities are, coincidently, important components of creating a positive culture, making special education teachers a potentially powerful, if underutilized, contributors to school wide culture. The teachers themselves saw the department as capable of having an impact on the greater school culture due to their "specialized skills," ability to "work with many different types of students," and "being more supportive." The answer to how special education teachers see themselves, their roles and their department within the school community is critical to answering how a CoP can contribute to the culture of a department or school. Special education teachers described themselves as having common personal qualities as well as specialized skill sets. Questions with specific representations of themes and examples included:

- Describe yourself: "Kind, always been a caregiver."
- Common qualities of special education teachers: "We work with students no one else can work with."
- What makes a special education department unique: "We have to do it all. We have to manage behavior, make sure IEPs are being followed and help teach all subjects. No one else can do all that."

Humor. All respondents stated that humor was important to them, both in their interactions with colleagues and staff. Interviewed teachers appeared to value informal get-togethers. In fact, these opportunities were mentioned as more important than CoP meetings. For example, Teacher H would share stories and updates about a student most everyone knew and was quite fond of. He would often tell amusing stories including karaoke performances the students would perform. The result was laughter, but, upon reflection, it also consistently created a warmth and affection for this student. Moreover, Teacher E enjoys leading the group in stories. This ability is evident during CoP meetings as well as social gatherings. This teacher will regale the group with stories of students that are humorous but never cruel. Instead, they somehow tap into either the collective knowledge of students or encourage teachers to want to meet those students.

Stories. One of the established principles of the CoP was that the special education department could not fully contribute to the culture of the school unless and until we had begun to establish a cohesive department culture. Part of that culture is the shared stories within the department. Stories about the foibles and successes of students are seemingly secondary elements or even distractions of the CoP. However, upon reflection, these stories and anecdotes were critical elements of culture building. In short order, minutes and plans for the CoP took a back seat to interactions and stories. Rather than digressions, these stories became an important part of the meetings. These story-sharing times initially began spontaneously but eventually became an expected part of the CoP's time. One teacher would often tell stories of how she solved an issue with students, how she dealt firmly and directly with detention students or parents or other teachers. These stories seemed to be this teacher's attempt to establish a strong identity within the

department. Because the group did not respond in kind and had established a listening, respectful interaction, the teacher's approach did not influence how the group communicated either in the CoP, or as a department. Some of the more profound moments during the meetings were when teachers told stories about the intensity of moving from their previous schools to this new school setting. These interactions in the beginning stages of the CoP helped create connections, and identity.

Stories and metaphors are important parts of Bolman and Deal's (1993) symbolic framework. One metaphor that emerged during interviews was the special educator as outsider within the school. The unique qualities and skill sets that are essential elements of special education teachers sense of identity to be misunderstood or underappreciated by many of the members of the school community. Additionally, some members of the special education department believed they were not recognized or greeted. For example, Teacher J recounted how when walking down a hallway other staff member failed to say hello. This experience was shared by two other teachers as well. Teacher G recounted how taking a paid position at school evening activities made her feel alone because she did not recognize or interact with other staff members or students. While sharing these stories, neither teacher considered that within a new, large high school, faculty members are still learning about their peers, and that feelings of isolation were common. Rather, teachers attributed these experiences entirely to their status as a special education teacher. Teacher E described the experience of walking into the main office at the beginning of the school year and not being recognized as a staff member. Again, this incident could be explained within the context of simply being in a new school. However, if there are feelings of isolation and being a second-class teacher, these experiences only served to

validate them. The stories can be justifiably attributed as the adjustment to a new school, however, that does not address the deep-seated feelings that would cause teachers to have such acute reactions of being snubbed and ignored. Most feelings of being an outsider relate to lack, or perceived lack, of professional status compared with their general education colleagues. Examples of teacher comments are below:

- "Other teachers don't know we teach some of the same subjects they do."
- "I can't do calculus, but I know they can't come in here and teach (names students from class)."
- "Some people may think we aren't actually teaching but we do. My students work."

In summary, the answer to research question one is that the CoP's influence on the department's culture is directly related to its ability to align its goals with the aspirational nature of collective as well as individual teacher's identities. The CoP provides an opportunity for communication that is important to all teachers as well as providing a format for discussion unique to special educators. Because of the isolation special educators may experience, collaborative efforts are important.

Action Research Question Two

To what extent are members of the special education department concerned about the inclusion of special education students in the larger school community?

Although it was generally agreed that the school had a positive, inclusive culture, members of the CoP consistently stated they wanted their students to be included in more school activities. The analysis suggests that this is a persistent concern among special education teachers. Additionally, six of the eight teachers interviewed thought that the

evolution of the special education department should focus on making certain "more could be done to increase inclusion in the school." However, while the goal of inclusion was voiced as a priority, suggestions of specific actions of how to make that happen were limited. In response to how the school could be more inclusive, teachers responded:

- "There is so much this school has to offer. I want to see our kids get involved."
- "When I see the students interact with our guys, it is so great. The more they talk to other people the better it is. People won't be scared or think they can't speak to them."
- "My kids want to do things. I am just not sure how to help them."

It was generally agreed that the school had a more comprehensive and effective approach to including special education students than previous schools where they had worked. Based on discussion notes, the experience of CoP members regarding inclusion was individual occasions based on teacher initiative rather than a strategic action plan. This sometimes led to the uncomfortable discussion that teachers would expect inclusion to be created by others rather than facilitated. In other words, inclusive activities would be developed and presented to them and their students, rather than taking an active role making sure these events are planned and implemented. In one instance, an opportunity was created for a low incidence classroom to visit and participate with a dance class. Later, the teacher mildly complained that she had emailed the dance teacher about another visit but had not heard back. It was pointed out to the teacher that if this opportunity for inclusion and participation was important and meaningful to her students, she needed to leave the wing of the school in which she was located and visit the dance

teacher to arrange the interaction. In other words, the concern about inclusion must be matched with explicit action for inclusion.

A student-led club, called the FIN Friends (referred to as the FINs by students), was created with the goal of fostering interactions between special education and general education students. Named for the telltale fin of a shark, the club selected its name with the objective to be relentless and always on the move. Teachers consistently recognized the club as an important element of the school. While specifically a creation of the CoP, the club was frequently discussed as a vehicle for how specific students and classes could participate in inclusive activities. CoP discussion of the FINs included reviews and updates on the club's events and upcoming plans. Begun in the first year of the school, support and approval of the club and its goals was more theoretical and vocal in nature. Many staff said the club sounded like a good idea. However, the club's growth has resulted in more involvement and teacher participation in club activities had steadily increased. One of the important functions of CoP was to report on club activities and facilitate new activities. Examples of activities that originated at CoP planning include:

- At the first pep rally of the year, the varsity football team walked out with the students with severe disabilities. The student response was overwhelmingly positive.
- The cheerleading team visited low incidence classrooms to make bracelets with the students, which they would all wear.
- One of the obstacles of the department was getting more special education students to football games. Crowd sizes and noise were obstacles to these families attending. We arranged for the student led group, along with some

staff members, to host families and students to attend the ninth-grade game. This allowed these students to be at the stadium. Additionally, we arranged for the band to come into the stands to perform and even allow students to play drums.

- The creation of a school "café" in which a special education teacher would support students to deliver coffee and pastries to classrooms in which teachers have placed an order. One teacher stated, "When the kids deliver the coffee and treats, it means the classes and students all over the school get to see them and talk to them. It's been great."
- A discussion of the CoP was the lack of special education students at school dances. Because of this discussion, we arranged for the student led club to invite these students and their parents to attend a pre-dance dinner and then attend the dance together. General education students danced and socialized with the special education students, who had been able to experience the high school dance experience (getting dressed up, pictures, etc.). Some of the students stayed a limited time in the beginning, while others made it late into the night. However, over two school dances, 26 special education students were able to attend these events.

One of the interesting aspects of this stage is that student inclusion appears to contribute to staff cohesiveness. Staff recounted events that involved general education students with special education students. For example, staff attending a monthly pool and lunch party described it as "so cool watching the kids together. I got to meet parents who talked about how much it meant to them." This staff member could describe this event to

other department members. Planning events or discussing which staff, students, and families would attend these events appeared to create a common element, which created connections. One teacher told of deciding to return to coaching sports after interactions with the CoP. “There are people here that are actually nice. I feel better about things.”

The creation of more opportunities for special education students was presented as an external action; the presumption was “someone” should do it. It increasingly became clear that inclusion was available to individual teachers, and that ideas and goals for student activities could and should be created everyone in the school community. It is worth noting that two of the more outgoing, gregarious and active special education teachers who have developed interactions with the wider school community were enthusiastically involved with facilitating inclusive activities with their students from the opening of the school.

Action Research Question Three

What actions might the CoP engage in the next round of action research to foster more inclusive opportunities for special education students?

Framing actions within the stages of CoP development, the next round of research to foster an inclusion school culture would include the following actions.

Potential

The CoP, as well as the special education department, will need to continue to establish its identity. The addition of new teachers will require the CoP to welcome new members and engage in the cyclical process of determining what it will be and how it will pursue its purpose. This stage will be a time of “building on existing relationships and interests” (Wenger, 1998, p. 1).

Coalescing

The CoP has been able to establish itself as vehicle for action and important discussion. As the CoP welcomes both new and existing members, it enters a time of opportunity for growth. However, it also a time of vulnerability of this transitional stage. Expectations have been raised, "people expect—and don't always find—great immediate value," causing some to question the value of the CoP (Wenger, 1998, p. 1).

These first stages of the next round of action research are opportunities to build trust and create relationships. It is also a time to listen and understand. There may well be a time to have a more candid conversation about how members feel about themselves in the school and how that might impact how they perceive their students are treated. The CoP spent a considerable time discussing students and their inclusion in the school. More meaningful discussion about what truly defines inclusion and an inclusive school should contribute to a clear purpose. This is a stage of balancing creating results with establishing a patient, methodical approach to some discussion and plans. It will be important to "shepherd the community through this stage" as it "needs to build stronger bonds among community members and create enough energy and momentum to sustain members" as the CoP coalesces (Wenger, 1998, p. 2).

Maturing

As the CoP establishes its identity, coalesces into a meaningful presence, it will enter its later stages. When asked their evaluation of the CoP and its evolution, teachers responded:

- "We are off to a great start. I like what I see — my students are treated with kindness and respect."

- "I think we can always do more to get out students involved more. It does seem there are some good signs, we just have to find ways to get them involved."

Now will be the time to include general education teachers and others in the school community invested in creating an inclusive culture. This will be a time of consistently establishing and re-establishing identity as an expanding participation can "disrupt the informal intimacy of the initial group" (Wenger, 1998, p. 4). At this stage, the CoP should engage in more challenging discussions and identifying previously overlooked academic and opportunity gaps. It will also be a time of beginning interactions and sharing knowledge with more formal school collaborative teams.

Sustaining

At this stage of the next round of action research, the CoP will be aware of its potential to impact the school community in a meaningful way. This will be a time to recognize and expand what the CoP has accomplished and what he will do next. New leaders should emerge as the group begins to move in multiple directions. It may be beneficial to hold "renewal events" to reflect on past successful, validate value and create new visions and goals (Wenger, 1998, p. 6).

Transformative

In the Transformative stage, the CoP will expand to multiple strands in grand webs of actions, goals, and projects. For example, one CoP member who co-teaches math as well as self-contained math classes, would like to create CoPs of math and science teachers focused on how to support special education students be successful and close pernicious achievement gaps in those content areas. At the transformative stage, those

teachers will have participated in regular CoP meetings to some degree, and seen the value of separate, single issues distinct CoPs. This will be a time to reflect on members' reflections of evolution and to prepare for a new identity. The transformation stage may mean an end to the CoP itself, as we prepare for new forms of collaboration and interactions.

Growth and Evolution

The next round of action research for the CoP will focus on its internal growth, primarily by having a greater certainty of purpose. When asked how the CoP can grow, teachers responded that more teachers participating would help the group grow:

- "We have a good thing. I think if more people come, they would get something out of it."
- "We have to get more of the team here. I don't understand anyone complaining about things and not coming here."

Teachers also expressed opening the CoP to general education:

- "I think some of the teachers would come. Especially co-teachers. That might help."
- "I know I can get [a co-teacher] to come to some meetings. That would be a department chair, so we can start talking more about school wide culture."

Voluntary participation may continue to limit overall growth. However, the CoP is beginning to experience and comprehend the value of peripheral participation. Teachers who did not initially join the CoP have come to both later meetings as well as inclusive activities.

Many stories from teachers revolved around next step moves for the CoP. For example, Teacher C recounted how:

> we could be a planning committee for how to involve our kids in more events. We did this in college for [organization] and it was fun. We can just plan things to do. If we don't do it, no one else will.

Several opportunities and events were then discussed. This initially seemed like an off-hand remark, but in hindsight is the beginning of members creating a mental model of what the CoP could mean to members. Involuntary collaborative formats can contribute to the productivity and strengthening of relationships.

Summary of Findings

Based on feedback from special education teachers within the department as well as the opportunities created for special education students within the school community, efforts to impact the school community have been successful. The CoP has allowed the department to address some of the natural divisions that can exist within a special education department. While some teachers commented on the lack of interactions within the school and what they perceived as a lack of communication from general education, these teachers were also among those reluctant to participate in activities meant to create a more inclusive school.

Informal meetings, either on campus or in a social setting, were valued and requested to increase. Favorite stories involved students and the opportunity to share them with other teachers. Two respondents mentioned that they wished they could share their stories with teachers outside the department. Interview questions revealed that special educators' perceptions of their role within the school community are important.

Answers revealed that special education teachers are aware of their unique roles. It could also be surmised that some respondents did not think their skills and contribution to the school were always recognized.

CHAPTER 5

RECOMMENDATIONS

Culture is not just an important aspect of a school, it may well be the single most important element that determines the success of a school community. Many problems as well as successes are the results or symptoms of school culture. A typical scenario is "graduation rates are low, so let's build a program to address graduation, we've got teacher absenteeism, let's put money for that. Well, of course, graduation rates are important, teacher absenteeism is important, but that's a symptom" (Hughes, as cited in Sparks, 2017 p. 8). The transcendent nature of culture is paramount because it "tells people in the school what is truly important and how they are to act" (Stolp & Smith, 1995, p. 14).

Additionally, culture can be difficult to change. Due to its importance and its resistance to change, it is imperative that newly opened schools consider the development of culture:

> "new organizations represent settings where it is possible to study transition processes from no beliefs to new beliefs, from no rules to new rules, from no culture to new culture, and in general terms, to observe the translation of ideas into structural and expressive forms" (Pettigrew, 1979, p. 574).

And Shark Lane's special education department has a unique opportunity to define itself while it is in its early development. The development of its departmental culture, as well as its greater school culture, is developing, impacting every aspect of the school and

every relationship within its community. The decision to implement this action research project to explicitly address and influence culture is a purposeful action rather than observe its haphazard development. This is relevant for any department, but particularly for a special education department, with its natural divisions that can result in distant and even fractured interactions.

Summary of Findings

Action research question one. How does a Community of Practice contribute to the development of culture within a special education department in a newly opened school? The purpose of Shark Lane's CoP is to influence departmental and school culture. Ways to increase membership have been discussed, with making attendance mandatory mentioned most often. One of the primary purposes of both the first CoP meetings, as well as interviews was to determine how teachers view themselves, particularly within the context of the department and the school.

It is obvious that special education teachers take pride in their role and identities. They view themselves as unique within the school community, with a significant sense of self derived from those qualities and tasks that they believe set them apart from their colleagues. Recognizing the importance of how they view themselves individually is important to efforts to create any collaborative effort, be it a CLT or a CoP. Again, and again, participation in the CoP and its impact were related to how effectively the agenda and outcomes of the collaboration connected to individual members interests and needs. For example, CoP members strongly expressed that informal interactions were important to not only building relationships but also more professional collaboration.

Learning and participation in CoP's "is not simply about developing one's knowledge and practice, it also involves a process of understanding who we are and in which communities of practice we belong and are accepted" (Handley, Sturdy, Fincham, & Clark, 2006, p. 644). This finding may have an impact on increasing consistent participation in the CoP. In short, the goals of the CoP must find ways to align with how potential members see themselves:

Members of the CoP have focused attention on ways to increase interaction between teachers in the department. Individual interviews have attempted to answer how special education members view themselves, the special education department, and school culture. Specific actions and activities were initiated. When the CoP spoke of "needs" that would be created by an external element (the school, administration, etc.), discussion was limited. For example, references were made that "there should be" a given activity or strategy. When members of the CoP began a more distributed leadership approach, its influence improved. When members articulated more informal interactions were important to the department, as the CoP coordinator I planned specific activities. During this round of action research, a final summary of the CoP and its relation to the school's culture through Bolman and Deal's (1993) attributes reveal significant impact.

Rituals

The CoP meetings themselves emerged as rituals of a sort. The simple act of meeting together offered a new staff a way of binding as well as reduce the anxieties and uncertainties of a new staff in a newly opened school. Informal gatherings and club activities became important regular rituals. Examples include a monthly Saturday pool and lunch party in which general and special education students swim together and then

they and their families join for lunch. This monthly activity has grown to include lunch being prepared by the culinary class, and inclusion of families from feeder middle schools.

Heroes

Heroes are emerging in the department. Heroic deeds are being recognized through the department and the school. Heroes are defined by the culture in which they exist, and their exploits are recognized by that culture's standards of heroism. Teachers' efforts to work with and reach "their" individual students are commonly recognized. This encourages other staff to be more mindful in their interactions with these students. This influence of being a champion to students has been presented to the greater school community as it seeks to address alternative discipline strategies and disproportionate suspensions. Additionally, students have emerged as heroes. The impressive and growing accomplishments of special education students is related to the awareness and recognition of the heroic nature of advocating, promoting, and facilitating participation of special education students in every facet of the school.

Stories

Accompanying emerging standards of heroism, the CoP offered opportunities for story-telling that increasingly focused on the positive. While not ignoring problems and areas of growth, the focus on solutions-based discussion, and recognition of accomplishments has impacted the stories told in both CoP meetings and other interactions. The value of humor is emphasized. Administrative reaction to the various interactions with the department and with students has impacted the stories that accompany these interactions. Stories are critical to the emergence of heroes and staff are

encouraged to share success stories, both big and small, through emails with the rest of the department.

Norms and Sanctions

The CoP's lasting impact to the norms and sanctions within the department might be the expectations of communication. Positive interactions are the expectations, with conflicts handled respectfully, discretely, and in a manner that uphold individual dignity. Further, the CoP has been able to establish communication with the greater school community, including general education teachers and families. This has resulted in being widely recognized as a responsive and welcoming school by both the school division and the greater community.

Action research question two. To what extent are members of the special education department concerned about the inclusion of special education students in the larger school community?

This question was discussed at each CoP meeting. All teachers expressed the importance of their students having the opportunity to participate in all aspects of the school. A student-led club created to increase interaction between special and general education students was widely lauded. However, an interesting dichotomy between this expressed concern and teacher action currently exists. While the active nature and diverse activities of the club are recognized, inclusivity is still seen as a passive aspect to the individual teacher. In other words, while the inclusion of special education students is certainly a goal, and celebrated accordingly, it appears to be viewed as an aspect of the school that is created outside either the individual teacher or the CoP. However, nearly all aspects of inclusive activities have been driven by an individual or a small group of

teachers. Several reasons may be surmised for this lack of active participation in creating or contributing an inclusive culture. First, the CoP has not entered the transformative stage of its evolution. Still very much in its professional infancy, it has not yet internalized its role. Second, interview results indicate that special education teacher see their roles as inherently contributing to an inclusive culture. Being a teacher of students with disabilities requires skills and personal qualities that incorporate a diverse student population.

Additionally, teachers commit considerable time and energy to create learning activities for their students. They develop meaningful relationships with students and families. Beyond that, teachers are looking for how others in the school can create additional levels of inclusivity. Informal conversations reveal comments that begin "I just wish someone would…" or "It seems our students should be able to…" Therefore, while the CoP and individual interviews show clearly that all members are concerned about creating inclusive opportunities for special education students, it has not fully involved how to internalize and act on this priority. For the CoP to be more impactful, it will need to find ways to engage teachers more actively in creating a progressively inclusive school culture.

Action research question three. What actions might the CoP engage in the next round of action research to foster more inclusive opportunities for special education students?

As previously stated, teachers have articulated their enthusiasm for the emerging school culture. Efforts to close traditional opportunity gaps for special education students are expressed goals of all members who attended CoP meetings and agreed to be

interviewed. The next round of action research will focus on continuing to create interactions between general education and special education students. This also means creating dialogue with general education teachers, particularly those in the arts. Within the CoP itself, attempts will be made to increase membership. Along with more participation, distributed leadership will focus on how members can create activities, routines, and rituals both within the department and in the school.

Voluntary participation may continue to limit participation. However, the CoP is beginning to experience and comprehend the value of peripheral participation. Teachers who did not initially join the CoP have come to both later meetings as well as inclusive activities. A summary of the CoP's status in Wenger et al. (2002) is below.

Potential

Interview results are discussed within the stages of CoP development. In the Potential stage of development, teachers were asked to identify themselves and qualities of special education teachers. All eight teachers responded that special education teachers and departments occupy singular roles within the school community. Special education teachers recognize they play a unique role in the ecosystem of the school.

Stories at this stage tended to focus on experiences teachers had at previous schools. Stories of feeling isolated and not belonging to the greater school community align to the potential stage. By sharing incidents of not feeling included in the greater school community, the opportunity is being presented to create a format of belonging, of collaboration that can be lacking for special education teachers. It also directly relates to action research question one about how the CoP can impact the culture of the department.

Coalescing

The Coalescing stage is a time of opportunity and danger to the CoP, when it is "particularly fragile" (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 84). It is a time when individual members can come together to decide an identity and create meaning. If too little direction is given to the CoP, it can lack direction, if too much direction it can compromise the organic nature that is one of its strengths (Wenger et al., 2002). The primary theme of these answers was overwhelmingly that members needed to find time to interact. While secondary themes recognized that time, delivery of services, and time constraints prevented greater collaboration, interviewees expressed the desire for more interaction. Five of those interviewed stated they thought informal collaboration was important to them.

Maturing

Primary themes that emerged were that the special education department had positive beginnings; department interactions were "laid back and fun," "supportive," and "Well-organized; I love it here." Members identified improved communication as a need but were sparse on suggestions. "I think we have good communication, but you can always improve" was a typical response. Primary themes that emerged about the current level of inclusiveness were that the school had a positive, welcoming environment. There were still concerns about teacher isolation. Some conversation has been started about how teachers themselves must contribute to their own interactions and acceptance into the school community.

Stewardship

It is during what Wenger et al. (2002) called the mature stages of a CoP that members were less sure of their answers and scarce in their responses. This is a natural expectation, as the group has not yet reached this stage of development. For example, five of the eight responses to the questions of new challenges or new initiatives said they were unsure or did not know. Along with previous responses, answers included "continue to grow the department" and "I want to be more involved in the school."

Transformation

Again, this mature stage of the CoP proved difficult for respondents to answer. Lack of extensive responses offered by members is an accurate reflection that the CoP is simply not at the transformation stage. The CoP is still in its initial phase of helping contribute to the department's culture. It is not yet self-sustaining or ready to develop new goals.

This first round of action research as well as the preliminary stages of a CoP are opportunities to build trust. It is also a time to listen and understand. There may well be a time to have a more candid conversation about how members feel about themselves in the school and how that might impact how they perceive their students are treated. The CoP spent a considerable time discussing students and their inclusion in the school. Based on CoP meetings and informal discussion, if asked directly, "Are you concerned about the inclusion of special education students in the larger school community?" most of special education teachers would answer in the affirmative. Indeed, based solely on anecdotal evidence, many if not most general education teachers would answer they are concerned about inclusion, the same concern they have about diversity, and closing gaps. A more

meaningful discussion is what truly defines inclusion and an inclusive school, particularly when we attempt to move beyond bromides and expected, acceptable answers.

Themes of a lack of respect or regard from the general education community were informative for what was to emerge from both CoP meetings and interviews. Any attempt to create an inclusive school culture, now and in the future, should be directly related to how successfully it could align and harness the need of the individual special education teacher to express his or her identity and expertise in the school community. Themes revealed a group of proud professionals, who feel underappreciated and under-recognized, wanting strongly to share with others who they were and their importance to the school.

Implications for Practice

The findings demonstrate that CoP can contribute to the developing culture of a special education department. All teachers interviewed indicated that members were concerned about the interactions within the department and its place within the school. There was a definite absence of specificity about either the current culture or how it could be developed. This is reflected in Wenger et al. (2002), comments about culture and its evasiveness. It will be important that the school's purposeful attention to culture include more explicit definitions when it refers to goals, specifically creating Bolman and Deal's (2003) cultural attributes.

The study supports implications for school leadership. First, a purposeful and explicit focus on developing the desired school culture should be a priority. This is too important an aspect to be left to chance. Second, school leaders should consider their level of expertise, comfort, and attention to special education within their school. Special

education becomes a community within a community. Leaders need to consider their relationships with all members of that community: students, parents, and teachers. Too often, this relationship is considered secondary to academic rigor, testing, and so forth. However, a culture that does not consider special education does far more than minimize the experience of a significant number of their community. It misses opportunities to facilitate relationships and interactions between special education students and families with those of general education. Additionally, special education teachers need to be recognized for their unique roles and skill sets. As identified in the findings in this study, special education teachers feel slighted by being identified solely as being "nice." While kindness, empathy, and patience may be shared qualities of those who pursue special education as a career, these qualities are supporting elements of skilled *educators*.

Another implication is the differentiation of inclusion. Special education departments are diverse and complex webs of diagnoses, service deliveries, and individuals. However, far too often research as well as school policy and programs treat students with disabilities as a "single aggregate category" (Stiefel at al., 2017, p. 114). Coupled with an approach that looks at inclusion as a nebulous, with a single goal, this approach can be ineffective or even harmful. For example, Stiefel et al. (2017) caution that "inclusive activities that bring students with individual differences together might at the same time differently affect feeling including at school versus feeling included with peers" and that "the distinction of what it means to feel included (and with whom) becomes important" (p. 112). Adding to this complexity, is that creating a culture of inclusion means that teachers are included in the school community. So, while Stiefel et al.'s (2017) analysis by disability group found that students with Emotional Disabilities

are an increased risk of not being included in the school community, there is are indications that teachers of low incidence disabilities are vulnerable of being isolated from their peers. This suggests a strategic, considered approach to inclusion.

Recommendation one. *Increase recruitment of new members to the CoP*. *Honor the individual.* The initial recruitment of teachers was based on the opportunity to impact department culture. In hindsight, this well-intentioned mandate failed to consider individual strengths and identities of potential members. The development of the CoP, then, was left to chance, the same lack of purposeful attention to school culture it was created to avoid. The goal of influencing the creation of culture, at least in the experiences of this CoP, must consider and leverage the power of the individual teacher. This means greater consideration of what the CoP, and its goals, means to the individual members of the department. The motto that has emerged from this approach is to "shrink the school (or department)." Any attempt to influence department or school culture must balance collective goals with a focus on attention to the individual. Wenger et al. (2002) identify egalitarianism and the group norm of equality as a "community disorder" that can compromise the growth and maturity of a CoP, making it difficult for members to take risks, begin initiatives, or seek to excel beyond group norms.

Recommendation two. *Honor the informal, begin to create and celebrate rituals, traditions while creating heroes*. Interview data and CoP notes reveal that teachers treasure opportunities for informal interactions. They enjoy hearing stories, sharing laughter, and importantly, sharing their experiences with colleagues with whom they do not typically interact. Again, a culture does not form without the individual. The department has reacted to this feedback by assigning a social director to plan events.

Additionally, we are planning "themes" centered on staff dress and recognizing staff birthdays. One wing of teachers vulnerable to physical and professional isolation is inviting other departments to share "coffee time" on alternative weeks. This is also an opportunity for meaningful stories to emerge and be shared. This is important to both the CoP and the school because in many ways stories will define the school, as "only a story can describe complex casual relations while incorporating implicit contextual factors that may be crucial to appreciate but hard to codify or generalize" (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 168). Just as the department is not at the mature stages of the CoP, it is not ready to identify its established rituals and heroes. In response, the department has created a monthly award to recognize a general education teacher who contributes to an inclusive school culture through their work with special education students.

Recommendation three. *Re-establish our domain while striving for stewardship*. The CoP, like the school itself, is still young. The special education department will grow by as many as three new teachers. This means the CoP's challenge to contribute and influence its culture will continue. The domain is the purpose, the "raison d'etre defining the identity of the community and its place in the world" (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 31). Therefore, it is critical to re-establish and renew what we are trying to accomplish. Concurrently, it will be important for existing member to strive for community evolution. This means creating what Wenger et al. (2002 calls combining "familiarity and excitement" (p. 61). In terms of the evolutionary stages of the CoP, we need to focus on coalescing our community, solidifying relationships between both new and old members, and making certain trust is present and strong. Establishing a focus on our domain is critical because of the credibility of our intentions. What have been called "one of the

fastest-moving destroyers of trust" are inconsistent messages (Galford & Drapeau, 2003, para. 7). Additionally, finding ways to create value for both the school and the department will be a consistent theme. Therefore, striving to find balance between relationships and delivering value will be goals for the CoP for the next year.

Recommendations for Further Study

Research Suggestion One

The findings from this study reveal several areas that would justify further research. One area of additional research indicated in the interview findings is how leaders of new schools approach the creation of culture. This means the explicit, purposeful attempts to create culture, rather than the hopeful, but ultimately arbitrary reliance on chance. Specifically, the research should focus on how leadership implements these attempts. If we accept that rather than a culture developing from a vision, leaders must consider and create culture as part of their visions, then certain leadership traits must be explored. First, leaders must establish credibility toward an inclusive culture. Too often, inclusion, diversity, and culture are "soft" goals given little priority or lasting importance. This inconsistency compromises a leader from a fundamental aspect as, "discontinuity between word and example will quickly erode a principal's ability to lead" (Tschannen-Moran, 2004, p. 178). Continued research on leadership and culture is timely and relevant: "organizational theorists have long reported that paying attention to culture is the most important action that a leader can perform" (MacNeil et al., 2003, p. 73).

Consideration should be given to the relationship between how accepted and welcome special education teachers feel in their school, and the degree to which special

education teachers feel accepted as professionals. Again, this is directly related to the concept that inclusion is created by others as opposed to taking direct responsibility for creating opportunities that ultimately contribute to an inclusion culture.

Research Suggestion Two

A second area for further exploration suggested in both the CoP meetings and interview findings is how an "inclusive school culture" is defined. An evolved, meaningful definition of inclusion matters because the goal of a positive, productive culture in the special education department is to contribute to an inclusive school culture. It is apparent that inclusion is still viewed through a deficit lens. Few teachers, educational leaders, or parents will directly oppose inclusivity as an ideal, realizing the social stigma involved. However, this can make true discussions about creating an inclusive culture even more difficult. Maintenance, in this case, is stagnation. The current special education framework and its approach to inclusion is "where the seeds of marginalization and exclusion are cultivated" (Braunsteiner, & Mariano-Lapidus, 2014, p. 36). Further research should be focused on moving inclusion to a value-based action. Research has found that parents are more accepting to inclusion when they are more included in educational settings "suggesting that inclusive values may be fostered by simply engaging in a dialogue and encouraging equal participation" (Braunsteiner & Mariano-Lapidus, 2014, p. 37.). A special education department's CoP has a unique opportunity to reframe the meaning of inclusion and how to leverage community understanding and support for greater inclusion for all students.

Research Suggestion Three

More research is needed to explore the relationship of diverse aspects of school culture to student learning and behavior. Responses from teachers reveal the importance of informal and social interactions to the cohesiveness of the department. There are some indications that these opportunities for interactions are equally critical for student success in school, particularly for marginalized students. For example, one of the primary strategies for academic support is after-school study. However, the student who never participates in after school activities and, more importantly, does not feel welcome in after school activities may feel less inclined to attend these sessions. Teachers in turn may think these students do not care or will not make the effort to improve their academic standing. Creating an inclusive school culture, a school where connectedness is prioritized, could have potentially large ramifications for the school community.

Summary

School culture impacts every aspect of a community. Current assessments goals have, to a disproportionate degree, overwhelmed and blinded a wide swath of our nation regarding what education means. Results are of course important, yet ultimately secondary and dependent on process. Culture is very much aligned to the various processes of a school community. Beneath both academic and opportunity gaps lies cultural factors. An explicit, purposeful attention to creating a departmental culture that in turn would be able to contribute to an inclusive school reveals that leaders must recognize the aspirational power of the individual. Accessing this power means tapping into their creativity and entrepreneurial spirit.

While a CoP is an effective collaborative platform for a culture-based initiative, ultimately in its mature stages distribute leadership must be facilitated as soon as possible. School cultures will rise and assert themselves. Culture's abstract and evasive nature can be problematic for leaders attempting to influence it, even more so for those who rely on a chance development. When seeking to create a school community that reflects goals of inclusion and acceptance, schools must create evolved definitions to clarify their intentions. First, school cultures should reflect a respect for student worth that transcends standardized test scores. Second, inclusion is more than simply educating special education students with general education students. This simplistic definition misses the potential of inclusion.

Additionally, inclusion should not be something done to a school. It should be facilitated and created by a school community. Far too many leaders, teachers, and parents view inclusion as another example of social engineering meant to create idealistic outcomes for a specific population. Even those who support these efforts are misinformed by true inclusion. Rather, inclusion must broaden its meaning to nothing less than the opportunity for full participation in all aspects of a school community, without barriers or fear of marginalization for any student. Further, this inclusion will need to evolve from its current deficit lens to emphasize its benefit to all members of the school community. Far removed from paternalistic charity and altruism, a genuine inclusion school culture creates itself through meaningful, positive learning and social interactions that benefits all community members.

APPENDIX A
Interview Questions

Stages of CoP development	QUESTIONS
Potential	-Describe yourself. How do you want people to see you? -What are common qualities that all special education teachers share? -What makes a special education department unique within the school community? -How can culture impact a school or community?
Coalescing	-What are the most important interactions that need to happen in a special education department? -How can the department develop trust between all members? -Identify how knowledge and expertise can be shared between department members? -Identify how knowledge and expertise can be shared between departments members and the school community?
Maturing	- How would you characterize the current culture of the Sped.? - In what ways, can the Sped Dept. contribute to the culture of the school? - How would improve the communication within the department? -How inclusive is the greater school culture?
Stewardship	- What is your role in the department? - What new challenges can the department seek? - Do you have creative ideas or initiative you wish you could pursue to further a dynamic department culture? - If yes, describe these experiences.
Transformation	- What are the most profound experiences you have experienced this year? - Describe ways you have observed the culture of the Sped. Dept. evolves? - Describe ways you observed the culture of the school evolve?

Culture	Ceremonies Rituals Stories Norms and Sanctions Humor and Play

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Culture

1. Are there questions that have emerged in the department or school?
2. Are there any rituals that have emerged in the department or school?
3. What are some of your meaningful stories about the department or school?
4. What would you describe as our department or school's norms and sanctions?
5. How does humor or play factor into our department or school?

APPENDIX B

Informed Consent

Project Title: An Action Research Study: Inclusive Culture Formation in a New High School

Introduction

You are invited to join an action research study that will explore the development of culture within a special education department. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. The decision to join, or not to join, is up to you. In this research study, we are investigating how the department's culture develops and how it might impact the greater school culture. The relevance of the study is based on the transcendent importance of culture, as well as the development of culture in a new school.

Study Details

If you decide to participate in this action research, you will be invited to join a voluntary Community of Practice (CoP). This is a collaborative meeting in which we will discuss the department's culture and how we are contributing to an inclusive school community. The CoP meetings will last approximately 45 minutes, 1-2 a month. Additionally, I will ask for volunteers for interviews that will take approximately 30-45 minutes. You may participate in either CoP meetings or interviews.

You can stop participating in the study at any time. Additionally, the study values peripheral participation, meaning that you can participate to whatever degree you wish.

Risks

There are no perceived risks to your participation in the study.

Potential Benefits

Reasonable potential benefits from this research is that explicit attention to the department's culture will result in purposeful, meaningful dialogue and action. A focused, cohesive department may also contribute to an increasingly inclusive school community.

While it can't be guaranteed that you will personally experience benefits from participating in this study, others may benefit in the future from the information we find in this study.

Confidentiality

I will take the following steps to keep information about you confidential, and to protect it from unauthorized disclosure, tampering, or damage: All interview data will be confidential. Data will be pass word protected. Participant responses will be coded. I will be looking for trends and notable responses that could potentially give insight into the department and/or school's culture development. I will be aggregating data, including observation, participation, etc.

Participant Rights

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You have the right not to participate at all or to leave the study at any time. Deciding not to participate or choosing to leave the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled, and it will not harm neither your relationships within the department nor your professional standing.

If you have questions about the study, any problems, unexpected physical or psychological discomforts, any injuries, or think that something unusual or unexpected is

happening please contact me at 571-364-2237 or email me at parrishdw@pwcs.edu. Alternatively, you can call Dr. Peggie Constantino 757-221-2323 or meconstantino@wm.edu or Dr. Tom Ward at 757-221- 2358 or email him at tjward@wm.edu.

Consent of Subject

Signature of Subject or Representative Date

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